

STATEMENT TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE on the Encouragement of
Australian Productions on Television

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I believe that the great medium of television is undeveloped and largely wasted in this country. I think that Australian television stations are not fulfilling their obligations. I think that the problems posed by the cheapness of imported films compared with high local production costs are not being tackled by the nation as a whole with sufficient determination or imagination. I hold that a great number of the problems could be swept away by a fresh and vigorous approach to Australian production. I am convinced that the high costs and the low quality of some of our few attempts at dramatic television are not inevitable, but are only symptoms of an unenterprising attitude and an artistic timidity in the face of the challenge of this great medium of communication.

I imagine that it is generally agreed that our television does run up a reasonable score of hours of Australian time on what may be called non-creative items such as news, sport, quizzes and variety - but that it fails in the vital hours of evening viewing and the vital matters of creative drama, comedy, and documentary. And I think it fails here through lack of ideas and lack of any will to use the television medium in original, creative or artistic ways. I think the pedestrian nature of our television is largely due to an absence of will to experiment, and to the abject practice of commercial stations of imitating American techniques, and the almost equally unenterprising tendency of the A.B.C. to adopt British techniques.

In the matter of drama, while I welcome warmly the better American programmes we receive, I believe that our commercial television's reliance on Hollywood's mass-produced shows for almost all dramatic entertainment is degrading to Australia. I should like to explain why I say this.

I have heard it argued that the constant diet of American fare is not likely to have any influence on Australians. The cinema has been cited as evidence, our television-station men arguing that 50 years of the movies have not affected us. Such a statement reminds me of a recurrent old joke I have seen several times already on television; for instance, Graham Kennedy saying that the kangaroo soup diet didn't affect him and then hopping off to the twangs of a harp. I have the feeling that station programme directors are so steeped in American

influence that they can no longer recognise it. In numerous statements on this subject by responsible station people I have heard American programmes extolled in extravagant terms for their polish, the excellence of their script writing, production, camera-work, cutting, direction - for all their technical qualities. The Dick Powell show is one which is generally held up as a prize example of all that is smoothest and best in American production, all that Australia could not hope to emulate for many years. It is a good example because it is in the same category as most Australian attempts at drama: it is hour-long, and presents a new drama with new people each time, and it ~~has~~ ^{claims} ~~pretensions~~ to be serious drama, rather than western or crime.

Certainly no-one could deny that it has the greatest technical polish. It is also frequently pretentious, pompous, humorless and outrageously propagandist. For instance, a recent play in the series (concerning a court-martial) contained these phrases in description of the U.S.A.: "Ours is the greatest democracy the world has ever known" and "Our constitution is the greatest political and ethical document ever written by man, except the bible." I wonder if Australian youth, fed nightly upon such comments, repeated and repeated through their staple entertainment, might not wonder if Australia is in fact a second-class democracy. It is certain that most ardent Australian viewers already think of Australia as second class in relation to material benefits, glamour, and good living. For American television tells them continuously in direct and indirect ways that citizens of the U.S.A. are to be envied above all others in the world's history. As background to personal-predicament dramas, the vision of modern America presented continuously is of undisturbed and infinitely enviable luxury in a land of happy suburbia and sparkling night-clubs, where all citizens march together to Utopia - except for the one bad egg in every half-hour programme. This enviable, unreal, luxurious image is a very deliberate side-product of American television, calculated firstly to give American viewers an extra lift with their entertainment: a warm inner feeling of self-satisfaction. This may be a harmless and legitimate commercial device for exploiting national pride - while it is confined within American shores. Outside America it is a second thing; it becomes foreign propaganda, and therefore degrading to some extent to those who are asked to swallow it in large continuous doses.

The point I wish to make is that the typical smooth American television drama, which apparently represents to many of our programme men the

highest levels to which the medium can aspire, is a very shallow product. It depicts an existence that is not a reflection of real life in America and is as far removed from the realities of Australian life as an animated animal cartoon. Its smoothness and polish result from production formulas, and from various accepted Hollywood conventions of how stereotyped characters behave: the upright hero, the good but weak younger brother, the psychopathic crook, the quiet but all-wise clergyman, the stern but noble military man, the blonde, the mother, and so on. In these dramas the acting is apparently ^{judged} ~~indeed~~ most successful when the actor or actress fits most closely the immediately-recognizable image of the relevant stereotype.

A corollary of the acceptance of these American dramas is the non-acceptance of the B.B.C's. and other British-made dramas. These are condemned as being stodgy, slow and old-fashioned. Certainly they lack the smooth technical formulas and the glamour, but they frequently attempt to portray people as people actually behave. Judged without bias, the quality of British acting and wit normally compensate for the more languid production. I am not saying that British dramas are better than the American, but simply that they are every bit as professional, and in their own way as sophisticated as the American. And we know that Continental makers have different methods again. But those who have adopted Hollywood's standards seem to believe sincerely that all other kinds are inferior to Hollywood's, and so all others are banished from our commercial stations.

I realise that the Australian public prefers the American, so conditioned is it to this pattern after years of films and television. Nevertheless I am sure that many British programmes would be highly successful on the more popular stations (especially if spiced by the Australian-made commercial breaks which many people apparently find quite as exciting as the drama). Even now, when British programmes appear only on the A.B.C., to many people they prove that, to be good, exciting and real, a drama does not have to follow the Hollywood formula. Other kinds of technique and other qualities in production can be just as amusing, suspenseful, and entertaining. Thus Australia might find quite new techniques or approaches to the matter which fit our own conditions, if we could break free of Hollywood's mesmerism.

Our commercial television, judged on its spokesmen's statements,

appears to equate money with quality of entertainment, and appears to allow nothing for the bonus of imagination and ideas. It bewails the fact that we cannot have and cannot even foresee having something like \$65,000 to make one part of something like "Have Gun Will Travel". I imagine that, if one of our stations were given such money to produce a programme, it really would try to make "Have Gun Will Travel" in the Dandenongs. But Australian dramatic television needs other things more urgently than the Hollywood formulas in script-writing and the smoother technical techniques. It needs to look at us Australians and to show us ourselves once in a while. This potentially wonderful mirror of society could and should show us how we react to problems and crises, not how stock characters in a dream glamour world react. If a television session presented an accurate mirror to Australians, I cannot believe that ~~it~~^{they} would tune in another station showing "Rifleman".

Our efforts at television drama should not be too ambitious at this stage. It is better and more entertaining to present a convincing duologue on a recognizable problem than a large cast uncertainly attacking an epic. Where imagination and ideas can best help our dramatic television now is in devising the most dramatic situations which require the simplest presentation.

When stations bewail a scarcity of good scriptwriters here, I believe they mean: firstly, a scarcity of writers in the Hollywood idiom; and secondly, a scarcity at the rates which they are accustomed to paying. I hold that there is a wealth of suitable talent bred in Australia, although much of it drifts overseas for want of outlets and due rewards here. If Australian commercial television could point to one single successful actor or producer of serious drama or creative comedy which it has trained and developed in the seven years of its life one could have some belief in its sincerity.

In the early days of our television a Melbourne station and a Sydney one combined to promote a big playwright competition, offering £3,000 in prizes in an attempt to unearth some backyard talent. Professional writers were not very surprised to learn that the promoters were disappointed in the results; they hardly got one suitable play from it and have announced that it was not worth the money. And yet in a sense it was worth quite a lot of money to them, for they have cited the poor contributions ever since as a conscience-easing proof that they have tried their best but Australian writers have let them down; therefore they are forced reluctantly back to the economical American material.

But it must be clear to anyone that the best professional writers would not enter an open competition and that the special requirements of television writing are unlikely to be understood by amateurs. A much more productive way of acquiring Australian scripts would have been to offer three of Australia's most accomplished and popular authors £1,000 each. I mentioned this to one of the sponsors at the time and he laughed at the very idea of paying any author such a sum. Yet our best, internationally-known authors not unnaturally expect to be paid at something like the international rates. I have no doubt that a number of them could prepare the sort of scripts needed, but not at award rates of pay.

The other principal field of creative television, documentary, is neglected with even less justification, for the adequacy of local talent to produce documentary or non-dramatic visual material with technical polish is demonstrated continuously in news features, and whenever an opportunity for journalistic television is permitted. Again, the numerous commercials demonstrate the degree of slickness which our directors and cutters have developed in this kind of presentation. Michael Charlton has proved in "Four Corners" that documentaries in the world class can be produced here if the latent technical talent is given intelligent direction and vitality of ideas. Our history and our present national development cry out for expression and interpretation on television: in stories of people and events that could be brought to life quite economically by a vital commentator supported by imaginative visual material. Yet this is so rarely done, and instead the one programme of the sort regularly presented on commercial television is "Biography", a fine programme, but American again, with the American emphasis and the American slant again. I do not accept any suggestion that a sufficient number of men of ideas, capable of expressing themselves within the realities of our television system, cannot be found. I blame Australian television's timidity in artistic matters for the fact that virtually no opportunities or encouragement have been given to originality, imagination and inventiveness where they are so badly needed - at the stage of devising and initiating new programmes. Therefore a major cure for the paralysis of original television would be found in anything that would lead stations away from their present undue reliance on imported film. But this alone would not be good enough. In view of their present attitude I can imagine the stations would counter such an embargo by importing any unemployed Hollywood men they could get economically and setting them to work making American films here. Thus I believe some

positive encouragement for creative work is also needed, something to discourage imitations and to lead stations to pay proper respect for original ideas. Thus I advocate a duty levied on imported television films, to be balanced by a subsidy paid to Australian productions - not at a flat rate but in proportion to their value as creative entertainment.

I realise that the last condition, requiring value judgements, would greatly complicate administration, but I think it is of the first importance, otherwise any subsidy system would be in the greatest danger of

supporting mediocrity. It calls for a jury or expert committee, and the precedent of the Commonwealth Literary Fund no doubt could be followed in outline. Television, however, is of course a very different medium from literature and its committee should be most broadly based to fairly represent Australian popular and educated tastes. Changes in the personnel at regular intervals could ensure a continuing fresh attitude.

Summing up, I submit:

Firstly, that it is essential for the cultural independence and integrity of this country that the American material which now dominates television should be reduced to reasonable proportions.

Secondly, that Australia must be prepared to pay for the protection of her own television production in the national interest, just as she protects young industries against over-strong imports.

Thirdly, that the payment should be judiciously administered to encourage a vigorous new creative approach to the medium.

Alan Seymour 'One Day of the Year'
 Alan Hopgood 'And the Big Men Fly'
 Ray Lawler '17th Doll'

No incentive to stations to encourage talent, creative talent
 Talent must exist in this field, as it does in any other art practised
 in Australia

Eliz'n Theatre Trust } precedents for encouragement of creativity
 Commonwealth Lit Fund }

Mr. G. Thompson, of Aust Film Producers Assn: "88 Collins St"
 instead of 77 S.S. wd be laughed off screen"