

Inquiry Into ABC Programming Decisions

To the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

From the Australian Children's Television Foundation

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your Inquiry Into Recent ABC Programming Decisions.

The Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) is a national children's media production and policy hub, committed to providing Australian children with entertaining media especially for them. We are involved in the funding, development, production and distribution of Australian children's programs. The ACTF originally floated the proposal for an Australian children's digital channel, which culminated in the establishment of ABC 3 in 2009.

In the time since ABC 3 was established, the ACTF has worked with the ABC on:

1. Two series of *My Place* (www.abc.net.au/abc3/myplace and www.myplace.edu.au)
2. Two series of *Dance Academy* (www.abc.net.au/abc3/danceacademy)
3. A new sitcom, called *Mal.com*, which is currently in post production in Western Australia;
4. A fly-on-the-wall documentary series following Australian children who excel in Irish Dancing as they compete in the Australian Irish Dancing Championships and go through to the World Irish Dancing Championships in Dublin, which is in post production in Queensland.
5. Several series of animated shorts that have been produced by a variety of animators from South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales, combining experienced and emerging producers and exposing the audience to an array of arthouse, contemporary and traditional animated styles.

The ABC plays an important role in developing and championing high quality local content.

All of the series referred to above were produced with Australian independent producers. But with the possible exception of *Dance Academy*, none of these series would have been commissioned by an Australian commercial broadcaster. They are all projects that push boundaries, meet much higher expectations than the standard fare dished up to children's audiences, and reflect activity and stories from all across Australia. Even *Dance Academy*, which would now be snapped up by an Australian commercial broadcaster because it has been so successful, would probably not have been commissioned in the first place, given the high production values which made it an expensive series and the range of issues that the series explores for the older end of the children's audience.

The ABC is at the forefront of developing innovative and multi platform content.

The two series of *My Place* combined are an epic television experience, taking viewers back in time from the present day to before white settlement over 26 episodes. Australian history over this time is explored through the eyes of children in a series which features a who's who of preeminent Australian actors, appearing along side over 100 child actors who take turns in driving each episode. This is quite simply an unprecedented achievement in children's television anywhere in the world. The producer, Penny Chapman, is the producer of other landmark Australian series including *Brides Of Christ* and *Leaving Liverpool*. I would strongly recommend that Committee members explore the two websites created to support this series, and consider the amazing resource that has been realised for Australian children. There is a website for children at www.abc.net.au/abc3/myplace and a website for teachers at www.myplace.edu.au

Creative Collaboration

We are currently jointly developing a number of other series with the ABC and Australian independent producers. These include proposed high quality music programs for children, a documentary series and several drama series. We are considering the development of a major early childhood series

especially for indigenous children intended to promote school readiness as our contribution to “closing the gap.” All of these projects, when they happen, will be produced by independent producers.

The importance of independent producers

We have read and heard much of the commentary of Quentin Dempster, the CPSU and Friends of the ABC, around the issue of the ABC “outsourcing production to the commercial sector”. Their argument is that these practices are transforming the ABC into a “platform for carrying commercial content” and that this is “commercialising the ABC by stealth.”

These arguments are misinformed and reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of the way that high end drama and documentaries are produced and funded around the world, and of the role that commissioning editors within a broadcaster play in the ultimate look and feel, values and substance of the programs they commission and in setting the overall vision for their network.

The reality is that independent production companies the world over produce content for both the commercial and public broadcasting sectors. Some production companies specialise in the kind of production that is nearly always screened on commercial television, and others may have a more “public broadcaster” bent on the basis of their areas of interest and expertise. Some companies, particularly drama production companies, will produce work for both sectors.

It is the role of the commissioning editor at a network to select and/or commission and/or call for works that reflect their goals and vision for their network. The commissioning editor will provide feedback and input at script development and production stages, have ultimate approval rights over all final scripts and over all major production decisions including the contracting of key cast and crew. By working with a range of production houses around the country, the ABC has access to many creative voices. In a small industry such as ours, this often means that a television mini series such as *The Slap* will have access to feature film directors, for example.

Furthermore, working with the independent sector is cost effective and the ABC simply couldn't afford to produce its current levels of drama and documentary in-house. The full set of 26 episodes of *My Place* cost in the order of \$12 million and the ABC contribution was about 25% of that. The balance of contributions came from Screen Australia, Screen NSW, Screen Tasmania and the ACTF. The ACTF will distribute the series internationally, but it is unlikely to sell particularly widely as it is so uniquely Australian.

Each series of *Dance Academy* has cost a similar amount and the ABC has contributed a similar percentage. In this case, however, the German broadcaster ZDF and ZDF Enterprises have also contributed a similar proportion of the budget to the ABC. We should celebrate that.

This is the way that high quality drama is funded, and even the BBC, which has significantly more resources than the ABC, works in this way. If the ABC were to fully fund an Australian children's drama and produce it in-house, it would use up such a large percentage of its overall children's programming budget for the year that it wouldn't have funds left to screen much else for the children's audience.

It is always valid to ask the public broadcaster questions about its charter responsibilities, however, and your Committee should do that through this Inquiry. A public broadcaster should be held to account as to whether it is meeting the needs of special audiences, including the children's audience, and whether it reflects Australia's diverse continent and community in its programming. With the privilege of funding comes the responsibility to attempt programming that would not be produced on commercial grounds alone. A public broadcaster plays a special cultural, educational and communication role, as well as an entertaining one. A public broadcaster should must, by necessity, meet its charter obligations in the most effective and efficient manner possible, and as forum for many voices. Its duty is to ensure that it maximises the opportunities to screen as much varied content as it can for the Australian audience, not to retain a commitment to doing everything in-house. The audience does not draw the distinction between internal and external production – it engages with the content that it associates with the ABC.

I would be very happy to answer any questions that Committee members might have – whether in person, by phone or correspondence - and to provide further information, including financial information, if your Committee members require that.

Yours sincerely,
Jenny Buckland
CEO



**Australian Children's Television
Foundation**