



Why Kylie sells and Paradise Beach doesn't

When the long-running Australian soap, *The Flying Doctors*, ceased production in 1993 probably the most aggrieved of its fans were the 700-odd members of its Dutch fan club, based in the small town of Nijmegen. Not only did these devotees maintain a widely-circulated magazine filled with news about the various stars of the show, they also sent regular donations to the real Royal Flying Doctor Service in Broken Hill. The highlight of the club's short life must have been the 1992 club day - attended by 400 fans - into which the show's major characters Dr Geoff (Robert Grubb) and Sister Kate (Lenore Smith) were flown all the way from Australia.

The Flying Doctors was an unexpected hit in The Netherlands where it ran in a prime-time Saturday evening time slot for six years. Even after the show was cancelled in Australia, the Dutch network, VARA, started showing repeats of the original series in 1994. Dutch fans and program directors alike praised the show for its 'basic earthiness' which emphasised 'good people, a healthy people and an attractive Australian way of life.'

The phenomenal success of a program which bears little or no similarity to life in The Netherlands is one of a number of intriguing case studies of Australian TV in the international arena in this work of significant worldwide research by media academics Stuart Cunningham and Liz Jacka. *Australian Television and International Mediascapes* takes a timely look at Australia's often successful, but sometimes abominable, efforts at breaking into the far larger markets of Europe, North America and Asia.

The flip-side of *The Flying Doc-*

tors success story is the case of the doomed *Paradise Beach* serial which set out to 'play at being American' right from its inception in the early 90s. Despite having a promising production, distribution and exhibition alliance of Australian and US co-venturers as well as a massive marketing push, *Paradise Beach* flopped in both Australia and the US. Billed as a cross between *Baywatch*, *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Neighbours*, it was targeted at the angst-ridden teen audience.

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Jacka and Cunningham analyse the reasons for the show's abject failure - concluding that trying to compete with the style-setters of the soap format in their own marketplace was overly ambitious from the start. Storylining was regarded as too fast (unlike the US style of slowness to allow audiences to miss episodes yet keep up with the story a la *Days of Our Lives*) but the emotional temperature was seen as too low - with 'cheesy', old-fashioned plots; not enough sex and the characters often being seen in the same clothes from one scene to another (something which is never done in US soaps!) It would seem that in attempting to be an Australian story for an American audience, the program failed to capture either market.

The major lesson from *Paradise Beach* for Australian producers and advocates of cultural exports is that local product for the local cultural market is best. Jacka and Cunningham assert that the push for televisual exports should be guided by the experience of the 1980s film export push when, often, local relevance was overridden in favour of perceived 'international' audience considerations.

'Any wholesale attempt to compromise cultural aims in the audio-visual sector in favour of pursuing the chimera of international fame and fortune first and foremost would seem to be doomed for television as it was for film before it.'

Wisdom through hindsight is an expensive way to learn. A more useful place to start for current producers with export ambitions is this carefully researched and thoughtful work. Among the book's many conclusions is that there is no predicting what will guarantee international acceptance of Australian TV programs. It would appear, however, that the programs which 'travel best' are those which don't set out to be 'the most innovative or most searching of Australian society.' The fact that the beaming, healthy young things of *Home and Away* and the subtle social analysis of *The Flying Doctors* have brought both programs huge success in Ireland (among other countries) was more of a side benefit to quality production for the local market.

We can only hope that these lessons will be remembered as Australia continues to thrust itself into the international mediascape. □

Australian Television and International Mediascapes, by Stuart Cunningham and Elizabeth Jacka, Cambridge University Press, 1996. 284 pages, \$39.95.