

Rewriting the script for the older generation

A recent Communications Law Centre/Department of Human Services seminar highlighted opportunities in the media and entertainment industries for older people with a wealth of experience and skills

On Thursday March 19, during Senior Citizens Week, the Melbourne Office of the Communications Law Centre co-hosted a seminar with the Department of Human Services, entitled *Rewriting the Script*. The event was sponsored by Cinemedia and was aimed at drawing attention to the involvement of older people in the media and entertainment industries.

In the first panel, *Peering Into the Past*, Master of Ceremonies Stuart Wagstaff conversed with writer, actor, director and producer Marie Trevor, and actor and singer, Lorrae Desmond. Marie commenced her career in radio where she was an actor and an announcer. She moved to acting on television then spent the major part of her career as a producer with Crawford Productions. She retired some years ago but found that acting still held her in its thrall. She now works as an actor as often as she would like to, and has recently been seen in *Blue Heelers*.

Lorrae still receives acting offers but believes it is better for her to develop her own cabaret shows rather than be portrayed as an older woman dying on *All Saints* or suchlike. Lorrae is a great advocate of going out and creating work if there is nothing satisfactory on offer.

Discussion in the second panel, *Performing in the Present*, was headed by film, television, stage and radio actor Charles "Bud" Tingwell. For Bud, working in the entertainment industry is just as exciting as it ever was. After curtailing his involvements in order to care for his wife, Bud has found that since she passed away he has had the "sad privilege" of being available to do more of his own things, such as appearing in the hit comedy *The Castle*. And the phone keeps on ringing.

Sue Brooks and Alison Tilson, the director and writer of *Road to Nhill* talked about the process of creating the film. Both of them made the point that the film was about people and communications and relationships in rural communities. It examined relationships that had gone beyond "happy ever after", looking at love and passion in later life. Sue found it easy to work with the experienced, professional acting ensemble who combined their talents so well in the film. She felt that there were times when as a director the wealth of experience the cast brought to the shoot was invaluable. She learnt from the variety of approaches the older actors had developed over the years.

Alison mused over the possible dilution of Australian language with the growing American domination of the world movie and entertainment market. How do we safeguard the life of Australian terms, and linguistic nuances? It is our older actors and writers who can ensure the longevity of colloquial communication through the use of words and phrases such as "mate," "bloke," and "no worries" instead of "man," "guys" and "cool".

Terry Norris, who began his career as a wardrobe boy at the Tivoli Theatre decided to throw the cat among the pigeons by saying that life can be difficult for older performers. After honing their craft over years in Australia, older performers can be sidelined, whereas in the U.S. and U.K., older actors are used more regularly. Terry said that the majority of roles are cast down so that there are few opportunities for older actors to develop their skills in character roles. Actors hold the mirror to life and to a community that is steadily ageing. Terry called on the MEAA to hold a seminar concerning the paucity of roles for older actors.

The final panel, *Forging into the Future*, began with producer and writer David Parker talking about a number of successful films which featured older actors. These included, *Cocoon*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, *On Golden Pond* and *Grumpy Old Men*. David encouraged older people to just get out there and make things happen. In David's view, the funding bodies are there for people to use, and he encouraged older people to make applications to fund new works.

The final address at the seminar was by one of Melbourne's best known and most experienced journalists Keith Dunstan. Keith said that only he and David McNicol in Sydney were still soldiering on at a later age. He found that newspapers now want a contemporary audience between the ages of 20 and 40, which is the age range of most journalists and management staff. Keith said it was more difficult to distinguish between news and comment in modern journalism. He felt that older people should remain in, and keep practising their chosen crafts to keep exercising their brains. He finished the seminar by saying that even if no-one paid him, he loved writing so much, he'd just keep doing it for nothing.

Bruce Shearer & Liz Sadler