



CURRENCY HOUSE BREAKFAST SPEECH

By Penny Chapman

29 August 2012

CURRENCY HOUSE *Inside The Passionate Industry*

November 2007. I'm drinking tea in Tony Ayres' and Michael McMahon's hotel room at the Screen Producer's Association Conference on the Gold Coast. Tony and Michael wander back and forth neatly packing – I notice how they respect their clothes. I'd have jammed mine in. We're revving each other up, as we love to do, with our exciting ideas for future projects and our old mantra, god we must find something to do together. We're old friends. I adore them.

But there's something else in the room. We've each reached a crisis point. The bravura is beginning to look a bit wan. We look at each other and say "Oh for God's sake let's stop mucking about and do this". "This" is a commitment we've danced around but never dared make.

In 2007 Michael and Tony ran Big And Little Films out of Melbourne and I ran Chapman Pictures out of Sydney. Various, we'd made award winning and high rating dramas and documentaries. Some people most likely regarded us as successful producers. Really, despite working like maniacs, we were just staying afloat.

The previous couple of years had been pretty clarifying. The local commercial television market only wanted reality shows. ABC's drama slate was disgracefully small. Ahead of us lay a splintered market of small poorly funded niche platforms. My forays into the brave new world of online content had revealed no money in it. I'd just sat through a presentation at the SPAA Conference on The Long Tail revenue model that promised, for an undercapitalised indie producer like me, a lingering demise.

A few years earlier, Michael and I had been involved in a Screen Australia venture aimed at building better survival skills among screen producers. One of the things this splendid

program encouraged was joint enterprises or strategic alliances of likeminded producers. We watched one take off and then collapse. I tried another with a couple of terrific producers – a women’s erotica franchise that developed a documentary series on the history of sex. Called 21st Century Vixen, it was enormous fun and had good potential if you wanted to commit your life to that sort of programming, but in truth it was always going to be something we did on the side.

Now though, the time had come to do this thing properly and doing it with Tony and Michael made enormous sense. We believed we had the capacity to be both honest and supportive with each other in good and bad times.

We invited producers Helen Bowden, known to Tony and Michael, and Helen Panckhurst, with whom I’d worked, to join us. We asked Maureen Barron to moderate an intensive day of marriage broking, so that we could all ask the important questions – what we wanted from this and what we were prepared to commit to in the getting it. We were clear about two things: we wanted to make money and we wanted to make programmes we could be proud of. So we made some undertakings to each other. We would open up our program ideas to interrogation by the group (applying the blow torch, we called it) and we would not shirk from letting a loved idea go if it didn’t have a strong market or add excellence to our brand.

At the end of that important day, we agreed to get engaged – to form an umbrella entity under which each of our companies would operate. We would share operating costs and revenues. And we would find ourselves a name. This was our first creative test as a group – some hilarious names were offered up – *Compendium*, *Compendious*, *Motherlode*, *Maniac* (it’s certainly how I feel, said Tony, but might be too real) and then as we got sillier, *The Whole Enchilada*. Finally Sophie Miller, who works with us, came up with the name *Matchbox*.

Then Screen Australia did more excellent things and invested some seed funding that enabled us to build a bigger development slate and expand our team of writers.

I was in development with a number of programs including *My Place*, the documentaries *Sex an Unnatural History and Leaky Boat* and with Helen Panckhurst and Aaron Fa’aoso,

a crime drama set in the Torres Strait. Michael and Tony were completing a number of projects and Helen Bowden bowled into the office one morning raving about a new novel called *The Slap*. Tony and Michael rang their friend Christos Tsiolkas to talk about it.

Then one afternoon, on a plane from Melbourne, I ran into David Marr's brother in law Ken Baxter, of TFG International. Perhaps this was the corporate adviser we were looking for. Indeed he was, and his excellent associate John Balassis came on board as our consultant. It didn't take him long to lob the depth charge - If you don't properly merge you're just fooling yourselves. We took several big breaths, struggled our way through shareholders agreements and at the beginning of 2010, formally merged. And John came onto our board. I am sure he considered us the biggest bunch of corporate adolescents he'd ever come across but this was countered by the fact we were in the amusement business.

None more amusing than a production Tony and Michael were completing in 2009 – a comedy musical called *Bogan Pride*. Created by and starring Rebel Wilson, it was really silly and very funny - about an obese girl who enters a dance competition to raise money for her mother's stomach stapling operation. It proved to be a very eccentric calling card. Michael Edelstein, new Head of International Production at NBC Universal, was in Australia later that year, had seen *Bogan Pride*, thought it a very individual and charming piece, and asked to meet Tony. Tony trotted into the meeting armed with a bunch of fliers with our production and development slate and at the end of the meeting Michael said, I think we want to buy you. Two nights later we were all in a private dining room in Sydney with the NBCU team. At the end of dinner, when the NBCU people had left, we all looked at each other and said "Shit". This kind of proposal we hoped might come 5 years down the track when we were established and worth a lot more. Just when we were all getting to feel our way forward as the Matchbox team, now we were being asked to embrace a much bigger organisation with a quite different culture. And what did this do to our position in an extremely nationalistic film and television industry where our Australian identity might be called into question?

Two things were important in negotiating our way forward with NBCU. The first was that we retain our editorial right to pick and choose our programs. The second was that NBCU

have a first and last option to internationally distribute our programming so ensuring that we get best market price for our product.

What we have had to contend with on the governance front, with all its strict compliance issues, has been well and truly outweighed by some big pluses – NBCU's capital investment has made a significant difference to the scale and verve in our development slate; its people are really good eggs; the other companies owned or part owned by NBCU, like Carnival Pictures (the makers of *Downton Abbey*) and Working Title Television are simply lovely people whom we want to work with (already one of them is in negotiations for the American remake of one of our recent dramas); NBCU owns very strong US cable channels like SciFi and Bravo, to whom we are already pitching ideas; our market access has opened up significantly; we have a relationship with a distributor who wants us to succeed; our international market intelligence has improved out of sight; and, most encouraging, NBCU is a company which values originality and individuality.

That said, the more things change and all of that. What we soon discovered when we set up Matchbox was that some challenges don't alter with size.

One incentive for setting up the company was that, we all agreed, the peaks and troughs of production, whereby a year of frantic production is followed by 18 months of gruelling, impoverishing development, would be a thing of the past. Wrong. In 18 months over 2010-11, Matchbox put through \$29m worth of production – *The Slap*, *The Straits*, *My Place*, *Sex An Unnatural History* and *Leaky Boat*. Then it all stopped. We'd all been buried in those production. We hurled ourselves frantically back into development. Oops. Our business plan (god how I hate them) was lurching all over the place. What happened to a beautifully orchestrated development and production cycle?

We went in search of a Managing Director who would pull us all into line. We found it in the splendid Chris Oliver-Taylor who was Deputy to the Director of Television at the ABC and running business and corporate operations there. A man who looks like he's just left school, he is the nicest person we know and one of the brightest. He's the strategist we badly needed and he's also a saint – dealing with 5 founding directors who are hard working but each eccentric in our own way, is no mean feat. He has reorganised us, established regular communications with our market, expanded our factual content by

employing two brilliant young women to develop in that area and he calmly manages the day to day work with NBCU. “Beat us up” we eagerly say like a quintet of bondage slaves.

The other challenge for us is that, in our past lives, we’ve all been mostly public broadcaster animals. Apart from a skirmish with Network Ten called *The Cooks* in 2003, most of my work, and that of the other directors, has been with the ABC and SBS – and programs like *Brides of Christ*, *The Leaving of Liverpool* and *Blue Murder* were all agenda setting in their way. Kerry Packer is said to have called his programmer the day after *Brides of Christ* debuted and asked “Did we pass on that nun shit?” whereupon conversations proceeded with the production company to whom I had sold the rights about Nine doing a follow up series on the show, a proposition quickly torpedoed by the ABC.

We love working with the ABC and, when it has the wherewithal, SBS. No one but SBS would have commissioned *RAN: Remote Area Nurse* and entertained the idea of a crew camped out for 14 weeks on an island 800 meters wide and one and a quarter kilometres long. A crew which had agreed to give up the grog for 14 weeks no less. Graeme Blundell describes a film crew as something akin to a walking remand yard, so you can imagine what an undertaking that was. No one but SBS would have blessed our quest for a completely inexperienced islander cast. The serendipitous outcome was the emergence of talent like Jimi Bani (recently in *The Straits* and *Mabo*), Aaron Fa’aoso (who brought us the idea for *The Straits*) and Charles Passi (recently in *Mabo*).

That production, by the way, was the first screen fiction set in Torres Strait islander culture. It was an immersion for us in a fascinating world. You spend 14 weeks on a tiny island where people live what appears to be a simple life. Helen Panckhurst, the co-producer, and I soon learned that the life and culture there is anything but simple – it is a very subtle, complex thing and each morning we’d wonder what one of our crew might do today that would get us thrown off the island. A young island man died of a heart attack, a young baby died in utero of diabetes complications. The islanders, we knew, were beginning to think we were a contributing factor. Two of our crew went drinking with some locals on a nearby island (it turned out most of the crew were there – Helen and I who had assumed the position of cranky mother superiors, frowning at any and all infractions and threatening Survivor style evictions, were extremely relieved we didn’t know *that* at the time). I took a great deal of time to work out that when our cultural liaison Rocky Gela said yes, he often

meant no. Then our island population one day went off to Thursday Island (leaving us frantically scrambling for extras). And won the Island of Origin football cup for the first time ever. These wonderful people considered we were a contributing factor to this as well and we all celebrated, both abstemiously and like mad.

No one but the ABC would have commissioned a children's series of which I am immensely fond and proud – *My Place*, an adaptation of the brilliant Nadia Wheatly/Donna Rawlin's book about one spot in Australia seen through the eyes of 26 kids over 260 years. Written by scriptwriters the like of John Alsop, Alice Addison, Blake Ayshford, Nick Parsons, Wayne Blair, Tony Briggs and Greg Waters, *My Place* has won awards all over the world. But because it's an anthology in which each new episode brings a new era and new cast, broadcasters need to work hard to find ways to build the audience addiction that comes from familiar characters on a weekly basis. It has however, gone gangbusters among educators throughout Australia.

And no commercial broadcaster would have picked up *The Straits*, our crime drama set, yes again, in the Torres Strait and Far North Queensland, because it is fundamentally a blackfella world and commercial Australia is yet to discover that great territory. That said, the guys at Nine really like *The Straits* and the people at the ABC observe, with some slight pangs their aging audience didn't embrace it enthusiastically enough, how much commercial energy it has.

The exciting development over the past decade, has of course been the rise of Pay TV in this country and the way in which Foxtel has positioned itself in the market – a purveyor of highly intelligent, inquisitive, smartly curated programming that aims to set itself apart from both the public broadcast and commercial free to air networks. We're very fortunate to be in development with two big series for Foxtel. We're as excited as anything about that and determined to make them very happy with their new partners.

We are of course, extremely pleased to be working with the commercial networks. They have been commissioning some very good dramas and in good news, Australian drama is once more winning big audiences. Anticipating what the commercial free to air networks want is a subtle science. It's one that we have learned is too easy to oversimplify. Nine, Ten and Seven each has very particular audience demographics but those sands shift all

the time. Reading the audience is one of the dark arts. As the competition between networks intensifies and the platforms diversify, in the world of drama at least, stories about real events and real people is very hot at the moment. Within that relatively limiting framework, the networks are nevertheless in search of “ideas that pop”. Our most recent outing with Ten has been a good, vigorous workout on the telemovie *Underground* – the story of Julian Assange’s teenage hacker years, written and directed by Robert Connolly. Ten are delighted with it and we hope that it brings them strong figures when it goes to air later this year. Similarly, we’ve been delighted at how Nine has responded to a highly original romantic comedy idea that we never imagined would be in their field of interest. Still, it’s a delicate dance we do with the commercials and we retain the feeling they are cautiously working us out. We like to hope that the “did we pass on that nun shit” might still be in play.

We do try to make our programs pathfinders – stories that will open up new ways of seeing ourselves. I *love* a program with a good proposition. And regardless of who we’re making a show for, my feeling is that we should always ask ourselves “why am I telling this?” “What is the idea behind this that will really catch at the public’s emotion?” My belief is that those of our programs that have worked have that good, strong proposition at their core – *Brides of Christ* (the age-old question of women and authority); *The Track* (an unexpectedly rollicking cultural history of Australia); *Blue Murder* (the code of honour that is among thieves); *The Road From Coorain* (the power of mothers in a landscape that discourages discourse); *Rampant* (the bloody-minded strength that lies among misfits); *Leaky Boat* (our urgent need to feel proud of this country); and *The Slap* (what worth our foundations when one small act can rock them to their core?)

NBCU’s Michael Edelstein said something encouraging to us recently – what matters is how strong and original and excellent the program idea is, not how well you’ve second guessed your market. Great ideas will find an audience, be it public or commercial broadcaster.

And now there are those in our company whose various peculiar passions can be aired in other markets. Tony Ayres is also a scifi and fantasy nutcase. These days he is busy peddling – with the help of like minded Giulia Sandler and others, program ideas to the US

SciFi Channel. Sophie Miller and I have a cold war thriller idea set in a mental institution in Kentucky. NBCU believe it has potential in the US market.

At the heart of everything Matchbox holds most dear is the writer. Writers are, without a doubt for my part, the most important people in our industry. They create. We realise. A good script is what will inspire and enthuse a crew and cast and is the basis on which this expensive industry attracts its finance. It is that on which everything else is built. We make huge demands of our writers, expecting them to cough up extraordinary truths, stories and arcane fabrications in all kinds of weather.

Whilst the screen production experience is a far more collaborative one – much more a layer cake – than say the writing of a novel or a play, I really like David Malouf's thoughts on the works of William Shakespeare and think them relevant. In a speech to the World Shakespeare Congress, reprinted with the title "Author, Author" in the 2006 Best Australian Essays, Malouf revisits an old question – how Will Shakespeare, "a very common person, a son of a small-time official in a small country town, a glovemaker and sometimes illegal speculator in wool, could acquire the experience – of the court and its matters, the law, the life of a soldier in the field, of foreign places – that would allow him to produce such a body of work".

Malouf points us to Henry James whom he says knew something about writers and the way they work. James asserted that a writer should write out of his experience. But what kind of experience? James tells of an English novelist, "a woman of genius", who had been commended for the way she understood and portrayed the life of the French Protestant youth. Actually, James tells us, her experience of French Protestant youth "consisted in her having once, in Paris, as she ascended a staircase, passed an open door where, in the household of a pastor, some of the young protestants were seated round a finished meal. The glimpse made a picture; it lasted only a moment but that moment was an experience...Above all, however, she had been blessed with the faculty that (when given an inch you take) an ell (mile)..."

Malouf goes on to tell us that what really matters is that the writer "should be 'one of those on whom nothing is lost'; an observer, a listener, a close attendant of the world's smallest affairs, a scavenger, a snapper-up of otherwise unconsidered trifles; and that everything

he sees, and hears and overhears, should be laid down in his memory, taken into the spiderweb of the consciousness and kept there to await the moment when, transformed by imagination, it will find its use”.

Another of our essayists, Robyn Davidson, has written that it is the poets (for which I interpret the writers) who are the ones who “lead us...back into the mystery of things”.

One of the treasures of my work is the days spent in a writer’s brainstorm room as we work our way towards the “bible” for a series. The bible is the introduction to the story and characters of a drama. The brainstorm is an incredibly exhausting process. People leave these sessions feeling wrecked even when exuberant about what they have created. It’s a bit like coven of witches. You need to park your ego at the door and not be afraid to divulge relevant, painful life experiences. It’s a place where the most experienced players demonstrate a brilliance for dreaming their way to a marvellous idea while at the same time constantly reading the room – what’s being said and what’s not being said. It’s an extraordinary journey in group psychology and when it’s working, you feel marvellously in love with everyone in the room. It’s there that you discover the people with the rich spiderwebs of consciousness Malouf talks about, brimming with characters that seem fresh and true and story ideas that are full of promise. And when someone else takes up an idea and runs with it and everyone is galvanised, it’s like the people in that room can conquer the world.

I spent three days in a room with Tony Ayres, Blake Ayshford and Cate Shortland a few weeks ago. And a few weeks before that, in another room with Jacquelin Perske, Cate, Shaun Grant and Wain Fimeri. Those brainstorms were full of rigour, good will, splendid ideas and propositions. And always people listening to each other and their own mind and memory.

There are the times when it is extraordinarily hard. Then you have to pick your way towards the proposition. And sometimes the mix of personalities in the room is not right (the producer’s fault) and that can be hard. Or the brief has changed – like when the ABC said to us after we’d delivered scripts for a 6 episode series of *The Straits*, “Can you make it 10 episodes?” Sure we can I replied blithely, not properly appreciating just how the unpicking of what we had would test all our equanimity, our patience and our reserves.

The final series, which won an Australian Writers Guild award last week for best original mini series script, is a credit to the resilience and talent of the writing team of Nick Parsons, Blake Ayshford, Kristine Dunphy, Jaime Brown and Louis Nowra.

Earlier I mentioned our pledge that we would interrogate each other's proposals and be prepared to let go those ideas of ours that people felt would not find a strong enough market. If there have been some pretty interesting moments along the way, it's been when that pledge has been tested. If we're honest, we have had a tendency to park ourselves on some pretty challenging propositions – a series on war crimes; an arcane history of food; yet another drama on the outrageous way we deal with people who come in boats. That's when the question becomes – who's the audience for this? What about the bottom line? This doesn't mean we won't make those types of programs. They'll just need to be balanced by programs with a bigger reach.

Then there are the times we'll have a furious debate about a good idea, inadequately proposed by an inexperienced team and – it's usually Tony – will storm off and work up another version and return with it and it will be wonderful. For while working with proven, talented people is what we love to do, we are always on the lookout for the emerging people with brilliant ideas.

Truth be told, we haven't lost our ability to be boundlessly excited by a good, original idea well put together. Even when it fails to fire on the first outing, we know it's worth putting carefully in the bottom drawer.

The creative tension in Matchbox is always how to balance finding as large an audience as we can while at the same time maintaining what we call the Matchbox brand – a striving for quality and originality. This is of course tricky. It takes both nimbleness and fortitude. And our best attributes can also be our worst. Not giving up on a program idea can become not being able to let go. Passion can become bloody mindedness. Resilience can become blind stoicism.

And our industry is small and often not very brave and there are days when we could cheerfully murder each other and (most days) when we appreciate the value of a fortifying hug.

When we set up Matchbox, we also undertook to build a stratum of young people in the company who can take over when we founding directors want to go live on the farm, or on a boat or in a darkened room. We're very proud of the team of smart, talented young people who form the spine of the Matchbox development operation. These people, mostly women as it happens, are our writers and directors and producers of the future. For the present, they are proving to be wonderfully proficient, smart interrogators of our work and champions of good ideas well executed. Every success we have owes a great deal to them. They are simply wonderful people. The trick is to find the time and the plasma – in a company now peddling as fast as it can to feed that business plan (I told you, the bane of my life) – to celebrate and enjoy the achievements and look out for each other when the going is tough. For the tough days – when you feel certain everything is fallen to dust – are shite. And the good days (like yesterday when we had a few bits of good news) – make you dance a little jig. Because, last but by no means least, that was another pledge we made on day one – we promised each other we'd enjoy the ride.