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# Bastardising the Waterfront Dispute: production and critical reception of the Bastard Boys mini-series

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**BASTARDISING THE WATERFRONT DISPUTE:  
PRODUCTION OF AND CRITICAL RECEPTION TO THE *BASTARD BOYS* MINI-SERIES**

*Lisa Milner and Rebecca Coyle*

Milner, Lisa and Coyle, Rebecca. 'Bastardising the Waterfront Dispute: Production and Critical Reception of the *Bastard Boys* Mini-Series', *Communication, Politics and Culture*, 43, 1, 2010, pp 143-164.

**Abstract**

This article examines the production and reception of *Bastard Boys*, a television mini-series broadcast on ABC TV in May 2007 that depicted aspects of the 1998 Australian waterfront dispute. Our research concerns how the dramatisation of such a union dispute (and historical moment) informed the final outcome as a media product. Employing commonplace fictional devices as well as seemingly factual referents, the series offers a link to the original events via four 'personal' storylines.

We scrutinise the critical reception of the series and argue that the supposed 'reality' and ethics of the dispute have been confused with those of the series creators in their representation of it. Although by no means the only creative production representing the disputes, the reception of this particular series was vociferous and controversial, and included then-Prime Minister John Howard's summation of it as 'lopsided political propaganda'. In this production study, we investigate various aspects of the process involved in creating *Bastard Boys* and focus on the issues the series raises for media representation of industrial affairs in the political and production climate in the Howard era.

**Keywords**

Docu-drama, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Australian unions, industrial relations, reception, mini-series.

**Author Brief Bios**

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# **BASTARDISING THE WATERFRONT DISPUTE: PRODUCTION OF AND CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE *BASTARD BOYS* MINI-SERIES**

## **Introduction**

The Australian federal election held in November 2007 was possibly the most fervently anticipated political event of the year, an election in which one of the most compelling issues was the Work Choices debate. Throughout the eleven years of the Coalition government led by Prime Minister John Howard that culminated in the election, one of the most divisive industrial events was the 1998 waterfront dispute. Some twelve years after this dispute, it is timely to observe how it was represented on Australian screens, and how such representational practices can reflect and affect public perception.

This article studies the production and reception of *Bastard Boys*, a television mini-series broadcast on ABC TV in May 2007 and based on events linked to the 1998 Australian waterfront dispute. Our analysis discusses how the process of dramatising such a union dispute informed the final outcome as a media product; specifically, a mini-series broadcast on the ABC and marketed as ‘drama’ rather than ‘documentary’ (or docudrama). In the first section of the article, we discuss the event in light of the production of *Bastard Boys*. In the second part, we scrutinise the critical reception of the series and argue that the supposed ‘reality’ and ethics of the dispute have been confused with the narrative approach by the series creators in their dramatised representation of it. Although by no means the only creative work focused on the dispute, the reception of this series was vociferous and controversial. The theme of war in *Bastard Boys* seemed to be reflected in divided attitudes to both the series and recollections of the original events. In our analysis, we scrutinise the series not just in relation to what originally occurred but also what it meant for Australia. We investigate the issues the series raises for media

representation of industrial relations in the post-Work Choices (and neo-Liberal) era, asking to what extent such a media product can and should provide an account of contemporary Australian ideology and political discourses.

Maritime industrial practices have continued to mobilise debate for over 100 years and they remain an important part of settler history for Australia as a continent dependent on trade. Among other areas of workplace relations, John Howard's Coalition government had the restructuring of Australia's shipping sector on its agenda since at least 1996; during its first term, the waterfront was identified as a key sector for reform, which would flow on to other industries (see Shipping Grants Legislation Bill 1996). In Easter of 1998, the Waterfront Dispute brought principal stakeholders and their activities into open conflict under the media spotlight. A brief overview of highlights from the critical six-month period will set the scene for our discussion of *Bastard Boys*.

### **I: The Dispute**

In April 1998, Patrick Stevedores, headed by Chris Corrigan, sacked its waterfront workforce of 1,400 members of the Maritime Union of Australia (or the MUA). Security staff replaced dockworkers with non-union workers, who had been trained in overseas operations by the National Farmers' Federation. Unlike most mass sackings, this event was announced in parliament by the then Workplace Relations Minister, Peter Reith. The morning after the sackings, Reith (House of Representatives 1998) stated that 'Our government promised it would fix up the waterfront—its rorts, its inefficiencies, and its archaic work practices. And we meant it'. As events transpired, it became clear how much the government had sparked the dispute. Over the next months, there were picket lines on the docksides in most states around Australia,

as well as mass street protests, and debates in parliament, the High Court, and the media. It soon became obvious that this issue was set to be a litmus test for all unionised workers.

Meanwhile, the MUA began legal action against Patricks, and in May, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission concluded that the sackings had been in breach of Australia's industrial relations laws and part of an unlawful conspiracy to replace MUA members with non-union labour. Federal Court Justice Tony North's orders for the workers to be reinstated were appealed by Patrick. The appeal was rejected and negotiations then began towards a peace package between Patrick and the MUA. The dispute was escalated by revelations that Patrick, with the Government's knowledge, had been involved for months in the secret training in Dubai of a group of Australian Defence Force personnel to become strikebreaking waterside workers (see Federal Court of Australia).

In August a settlement was arranged, and by the end of that month 689 workers were re-employed as permanents. The debate still continues over who ultimately triumphed from the dispute. Chris Corrigan wanted a profitable company—and he got this, with profits tripling in the months after the dispute and Patrick's share price rising 800 percent in the next two years. But he had to employ a unionised workforce (plus pay hefty legal costs and outstanding wages). The union wanted to safeguard the rights of its members—which it did, but with 626 redundancies and changed conditions, including a massive casualisation of its members. While it lost ground in the public relations war largely waged through the media, the Coalition government remained in power in the July 1998 Federal election.

The dispute stands alongside the coal strikes of 1949 as one of Australia's biggest industrial showdowns. And not only was it extensively reported in 1998, but it later inspired a range of cultural products including two theatrical productions, three books, a union film, numerous current affairs reports and features<sup>1</sup> and of course the *Bastard Boys* ABC-TV production. As media studies researchers, we are concerned with a particular product as a creative interpretation of (aspects of) the dispute, formatted for consumption as television drama.

## **II: *Bastard Boys* Production**

*Bastard Boys* was written by Sue Smith, directed by Ray Quint, and produced by Brett Popplewell. A book version of Smith's screenplay was also published by Currency Press in 2007. The idea for the production was first mooted by Quint who had read *Waterfront*, the book about the dispute written by *Sydney Morning Herald* journalists Helen Trinca and Anne Davies. In about 2002 he approached Popplewell to work on a TV production based on the book and in 2004 Sue Smith was commissioned for the adaptation. In 2005, the Film Finance Corporation approved \$6.2 million funding for the production, and the ABC began production in July 2006, filming in Melbourne and Sydney. *Bastard Boys* was first screened on Sunday 13 May and Monday 14 May, 2007, and it was watched by close to one million viewers.<sup>2</sup> Later in 2007, Smith received an AWGIE and an AFI award for her *Bastard Boys* screenplay.

The production was conceived as a four-part mini-series, but about 3 weeks prior to broadcast, it was reconfigured to screen over two nights rather than four. It comprises 4 one-hour long instalments centred on ACTU representative Greg Combet, the lawyer Josh Bornstein, a made-up union representative Sean McSwain, and Patricks' CEO Chris Corrigan. The chapters are titled Greg's War, Josh's War etc and show each of these central

protagonists at critical personal and professional turning points in their lives. ABC's then Head of Drama, Scott Meek, claimed, 'Audiences want to see shows about what it means to be a contemporary Australian' (cited in Clune 2006, p. 22). A significant aspect of the production is the choice of the four individual stories to relate the drama. The series stars veteran Australian actors Jack Thompson, Geoff Morrell, and Colin Friels. It depicts actual historical events, and actual people, but it also uses fictional characters as composites or pure inventions. Meek claimed the show to be 'not about politics, it's about people' (cited in Enker 2007, p.12). Sue Smith based the script on Trinca and Davis' book, but also on court transcripts and interviews with many of the main players and peripheral characters in the dispute. She wanted to make it a personal drama from the four viewpoints, arguing, 'It is political in so far as it is a political event but the dramatic approach I've taken is a personal one' (cited in Bodey 2006a, p. 6).

This article's scope does not allow a detailed textual analysis of the complete series, but some description of key sequences serves to reflect our argument. The episode opening sequences establish the key protagonists featured in the series as well as the screenplay and *mise-en-scène* approaches; for example, the fictional devices for the individual stories employ interwoven timeframes, realist settings and direct-to-camera address alternating with located drama. While effective for storytelling and building narrative momentum, these devices also challenge the historical and political project at work here, as discussed below. The pre-title opening sequence for the series introduces some of the central protagonists but also, significantly, highlights the theme of war. As it establishes critical devices alongside the characters and narrative, it is worth describing in some detail.

Following the ABC logo, heavily resonant drums and a bass drone accompany production credits, leading into the signature theme featuring brass instruments on a slow crescendo. White

text on a black background reinforces the narrative hook of conflict: ‘On April 7 1998 war broke out on the Australian waterfront...’ followed by a series of night-time backlit images of guards, water boats and dogs interspersed with actor names. The docks are introduced via images of colourful cranes and the music portentously rises alongside sounds of panting dogs, marching footsteps and machinery. Tony Tully, a (fictional) wharfie (played by Jack Thompson), appears on-screen in a studio-style location to remark to-camera, ‘Me? I was in the straddle...’ initiating the sequence that continues to interject the ‘narrative’ of the security guards taking over the docks. To-camera comments by another wharfie, Brendan Tully (Daniel Wyllie), MUA leader John Coombs (played by Friels), Greg Combet (Daniel Frederiksen), and Chris Corrigan (Morrell). After Coombs remarks on his communication about the take-over, a powerfully evocative rendition<sup>3</sup> of Edwin Starr’s ‘War!’ song<sup>4</sup> is introduced (‘War... what is it good for? Absolutely nothing...’) and continues under the rest of the sequence. The ‘Bastard Boys’ on-screen title is preceded by Corrigan’s recollection of a dream he had on the night in question, in which he remembered his employment as a youth by ‘an Hungarian refugee’ who demanded, ‘work a little harder, bastard boys’. This opening sequence leads into the ‘Greg’s War’ story that commences with events occurring six months earlier. The chronology of the narrative proceeds from that point, and this segment segues into ‘Josh’s War’ for the second part of the first broadcast. The second broadcast comprises ‘Sean’s War’ and ‘Chris’s War’.

Each of the four stories brings in the key role these protagonists play in the dispute, and include scenes representing their personal lives. For example, some potent scenes include the roles of wives and partners in supporting the principal characters and domestic arena issues such as childcare and blended families are woven into the storylines. Indeed, Smith argued that the focus on individuals came from her observations of personal stories, ‘it was a moment in their lives that defined who they were—as a father, husband, mate, provider, worker or leader... So for me, the story became a war with each individual character forced to fight their own battle’ (cited in



'Hard Yakka' 2007, p. T05). These characters are portrayed in two camps, one of which includes John Coombs who, as a union leader, realises that the event challenges all that he has fought for over many years; Greg Combet as a young and ambitious union manager who wishes to 'earn his stripes'; and Josh Bernstein as a passionate lawyer who prepares a radical strategy for the union. This team supports the workers who are primarily represented by Sean McSwain, the reluctant union representative who needs to show his mettle and leadership to win back his estranged partner, and the Tully father and son wharfies and union stalwarts.

The 'other side' is less narratively realised, primarily portrayed through the character of Chris Corrigan who is represented as risking everything to take on the MUA in this battle while serving the government's agenda for workplace reform. It is significant (but not surprising given the limited scope of the story) that not only the role of the Howard Federal Government, but also that of farmers—who rely on an efficient waterfront for exporting their product and who traditionally supply support for conservative governments—were marginalised in the story, as they were in the original news coverage of the dispute. What becomes apparent is that the two 'sides' are not unified in their position and activities, thereby effectively suggesting Australia's transitional moment in union strategies and support, Left-Right politics and the concept of collective bargaining in the contemporary period. Davidson notes that, in terms of 'balance' of the two sides, while three of the stories focus on a pro-union agenda and only one on the Patricks camp, all are sympathetically portrayed (2007, p. 140). Thuggish and divisive behaviour is evoked in characterisations of workers, security men and politicians alike.

Three additional sequences are notable for these and other reasons. On Easter Sunday, families gather at the picket line to support rostered picketers and Tony Tully carves a roast at a long table. The dinner is interrupted by the arrival of contracted non-union workers in a bus. Corrigan

is interviewed inside the dockyard in front of the Australian Endeavour ship, from which workers shout defiant support for the MUA. Meanwhile, at the picket line, adults and children alike dance the Macarena and police officers join in. The scene is broadcast on television, much to Corrigan's chagrin, who understands the value of such television imagery in support of the unionists. However, this message is disrupted in a scene two days later, when an angry crowd of picketers are confronted by police officers sent to break up the line. Amidst the shouting, arms-interlocked picketers are two children of one of the rostered men, cowering from the resistant jostling and invective hurled at the police.<sup>5</sup> Coombs calls Sean to protest at the presence of the children (whose mother is working), arguing, 'What's Mum and Dad in Carlingford going to think of that?... Channel 9 doesn't take any prisoners...'. A later extended sequence movingly conveys a 'peaceful assembly' of MUA picketers, union supporters and protestors, and ACTU leaders opposing police supporting Patricks at Swanson Dock, Melbourne. Despite Sean's urging quiet, an outbreak of violence seems imminent as angry picketers and thousands of supporters from other unions face off against police wielding riot shields and protecting non-union workers. The stalemate is broken when a mass of MUA supporters from the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) stream into position behind the police lines, and their untenable position forces the police to disperse, enabled by Sean who claims a victory for the night and urges maintenance of non-violence. Once again, music and sound affectively assist in carrying the triumphant moment, with renditions of union songs, and chanting 'the workers united will never be defeated' and 'MUA here to stay'. The scene narratively conveys Sean's 'coming of age' as a union leader but also a notable change in union strategy from one of violent confrontation to a law-abiding, media-effective peaceful protest, much to the regret of older union workers who hanker to 'have it out' with the perceived enemy.

The scheduling of the second part of the series on Monday evening meant that the second episode displaced the ABC's flagship current affairs program, *Four Corners*, as well as *Media*

*Watch*. This was only the second time in modern ABC programming that these high-rating programs had been shifted, a shift that enabled *Bastard Boys* to be screened over 2 consecutive nights and in the prime viewing timeslots. The production rated well for an ABC program and for its genre, finishing third in its timeslot. Importantly for our discussion, the series generated lively discussion—and sectional debate—from various cohorts of viewers, and how the media product was received is worth examining.

### **III: *Bastard Boys* Reception**

It is relevant to note the sheer volume of published comment about the *Bastard Boys* series and also how opinion reflected in this form was divided over it.<sup>6</sup> An informal content analysis conducted by the authors determined the nature and quantity of attention given to the mini-series both as a work in its own right and in relation to other media products inspired by the 1998 dispute using the news and current affairs database Factiva. The period of analysis began from the first mention of the series in the database (24 November 2005) through the screening on the ABC in May 2007 to six months after its screening (5 August 2007). The search found a total of 409 articles responding to *Bastard Boys*, and, based on identification of descriptive keywords or phrases<sup>7</sup>, 107 of those were generally positive, 113 were generally negative and 189 neutral (possibly reflecting press releases for the series rather than critical analysis). Compared to this, a search for mentions of all previous cultural by-products of the dispute produced only thirteen articles from the period of the real-life dispute in 1998 to the end of 2007. Although our analysis was limited, it provides a clear indication of two points: that the mini-series was by far the most controversial cultural by-product of the dispute (perhaps indicative of effective ABC marketing), and that it significantly divided opinion amongst its viewers and critics.

*Bastard Boys*, as the title suggests, includes some strong language, and reviews of the series point this out. But the most passionate criticism centres on the series' perceived 'political bias' and accuracy—or inaccuracy. Controversy around the series was fanned by the fact that it was scheduled to screen during the debate in public, parliamentary and media fora over the new Work Choices Legislation. And it was serendipitous (if coincidental) timing also, because it was screened just days after Greg Combet announced his move from union life, when he was endorsed as Labor candidate for the NSW federal seat of Charlton.

The production provoked public comments by viewers via blogs and letters to newspapers<sup>8</sup> as well as people portrayed in the production, politicians, and media critics. Amongst people portrayed in the series, Combet remarked on the portrayal of his character as 'not entirely true to life' (cited in 'Combet says the public supports Labor's IR policies'), as did many of the others depicted. John Coombs thought that the producers 'did a pretty good job' (cited in Kilponen 2007, p. 38) but Bill Kelty and Josh Bornstein claimed they were misrepresented (Kermond & Rumble 2007, p. 17) and Kelty threatened to sue the ABC for defamation, due to his limited characterisation. Meanwhile, Chris Corrigan said that the series was 'a huge rewrite of history' (cited in Bodey 2006b) and 'a tedious portrayal of predictable stereotypes' (Corrigan 2007, p. 10).

Astonishingly for a work of drama, the topic of the production took up over 30 minutes of Senate Parliamentary Debates in August 2006, months *before* it was produced or screened. Liberal senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells attacked the program, claiming that 'this smacks of another example of wasteful spending by the ABC being used to drive an anti-government, pro-Left agenda, conveniently timed to appear during an election year' (cited in

Bodey 2006a, p. 6). ALP Senator Kate Lundy said that allegations such as those expressed by Senator Wells are 'just another attempt by Howard government members to try to bully and intimidate the ABC into conforming to their view of history' (House of Representatives 2006).

One of the most reported criticisms by politicians of the *Bastard Boys* followed the production's broadcast. Prime Minister John Howard labelled it 'one of the most lopsided pieces of political propaganda I've seen on the national broadcaster in years' (cited in 'PM says *Bastard Boys* is lopsided political propaganda', 2007). Senator Eric Abetz, Federal Minister for Fisheries, Forestry and Conservation, said the program 'did not show the corruption of the Unions, which the Liberal Government had to clean up' (Abetz 2007), and Federal Trade Minister Warren Truss called the production 'rewritten history' (Truss 2007).

By far the most criticism came from the media itself, in previewing and reviewing *Bastard Boys*. Over many months, the media had reported that the production would most likely be controversial, simply because of the topic, as well as that feelings still ran deep on both sides.<sup>9</sup> The anticipated controversy also related to the producer being the national broadcaster, which had been accused of bias in the reporting of the actual dispute. One of the major accusations levelled by Senator Wells was that the ABC was biased in its reports of the *actual* events in 1998, and this view was later supported in a report by the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA). Senator Richard Alston, then responsible for the ABC, subsequently called for a report into ABC bias in the event coverage on news and current affairs programs. In May 1998, Phillip Bell's ABC-commissioned analysis of ABC television coverage showed that, in the 7pm *ABC News* and the 7.30 *Report* programs, the broadcaster gave roughly equal amounts to what was depicted as the major antagonists in the dispute.

Bell analysed the ‘sound bites’, visual presence, interviews and other components of these programs, and concluded that the programs ‘acted professionally and fairly insofar as balance and accuracy can be judged’ (Bell 1998b, p. 15). This report in turn received accusations of bias, notably from the IPA, an organisation with close links to one of the ABC’s competitors, Rupert Murdoch (Warby & Morrison 1999). Neither of the studies examined the overall media coverage of the dispute (that is, across all media and media sectors) nor general audience response to the original coverage. In a research article published in 2000, academic Chris McConville characterised the coverage in the following terms:

... while those journalists writing for the financial pages of daily newspapers remained critical of the MUA, general news reporting and indeed coverage on radio and television could be read as turning speedily to the side of the unionists. Perhaps the last refuge of antiunion virulence remained in those talk-back radio programs networked out of Sydney but to which many calls were made from rural Australia (McConville 2000, p. 404).

Leaving aside original news coverage of the event, reception to the *Bastard Boys* mini-series was similarly divided. Amongst media critics, Piers Ackerman, notably anti-ABC, referred to it as ‘a wet and slippery dream disguised as entertainment’ and ‘farical *Bastard Boys* fiction’ (Ackerman 2007). ABC employee Michael Duffy labelled it ‘the most blatant union propaganda’ (Duffy 2007) and was rebutted by Phillip Adams who wrote that Duffy’s complaint ‘reads like a precursor to political censorship’ (Adams 2007). But the criticism was not all negative—left-leaning Robert Manne called it ‘one of the finest pieces of Australian television I have seen’ and wrote that ‘by its conclusion, through intellectual rigour, a historically accurate and politically fair-minded balance has been achieved’ (Manne 2007). Overall, it seems, the notably divided responses to the series suggests that critics and

viewers interpreted the program according to its supposedly 'realist' narrative, not as television (fictional) drama that observed specific genre conventions. *Bastard Boys* can be mapped against its reception via a series of media framing contexts. It appears that the morals and political pros and cons of the original dispute have been confused with the televisual merits (or otherwise) of the production.

#### **IV: Product Context**

The media provides a crucial role in framing important and controversial issues for the public. In our image—and information-rich—world, we understand these issues very often in visual terms—the snarling dogs and picket lines on the docks, the little children embroiled in the melee. This is how our sense of the past is constructed and reconstructed. Because of their influence, the media become, to quote Gurevitch and Levy, 'a site on which various social groups, institutions, and ideologies struggle over the definition and construction of social reality' (Gurevitch & Levy 1985, p. 19).

Viewers of film and television programs, whether documentaries, dramas or news, each bring their own package of knowledge, preconceptions, and understandings from actual events, and from other media (including radio talkback, books and plays). The high level of coverage of the industrial dispute, in print media and broadcast television, adds to this package. Prime Minister Howard described the original dispute as a 'defining moment in Australia's industrial history' (cited in Ingram 2003). Certainly the dispute, and its multifarious ramifications, dominated national media reports for an extended period, and from a variety of angles that included the overriding industrial issues, the intrigue, who was involved in the protests, the international ramifications. In a July 1998 *Walkley Magazine* article reflecting on the media coverage, then workplace writer for the *Sydney Morning*

*Herald*, Helen Trinca, observed how the event enabled a special kind of news coverage due to its unusual characteristics:

Every big story is different, but this one broke all the rules. It ran for far longer than most. It held the attention of chiefs of staff and editors for weeks, rather than days. At its height, there were fresh angles every day and, on most days, several angles... In Australia, it has been a long time since we have seen a story with such staying power and with so much action (Trinca 1998, pp. 32-33).<sup>10</sup>

Nielsen polls on the reactions of 'ordinary Australians' competed for space with specialist analyses and letters to the editor. Over the first month of the dispute (8 April to 6 May), the Factiva database returned a total of 1240 'hits' searching mentions of the MUA, compared to only 158 over the previous month and 391 in the following month. As McConville noted, the MUA 'placed great emphasis on media representation of their campaign' (McConville 2000, p.406) and this proved a successful strategy that enabled public sympathies to shift from general anti-wharfie cynicism to support for their cause.<sup>11</sup> The IPA report notes that the ABC reported on the dispute 27 out of 29 days during that period, with the story leading the news bulletin 17 times (Warby & Morrison 1999, p. 2). Bell's study of ABC Radio coverage reported that the three programs surveyed (*AM*, *The World Today* and *PM*) broadcast interviews, sound bites or paraphrases of participants 552 times over the same period (Bell 1998b). More than the volume of the electronic media coverage of the dispute, the quality and style of it played a crucial role in residual impressions of relevant events. McConville argues,

Perhaps one of the keys to employer frustration lay in the image of the wharfie that was established through television news footage. Pickets were generally orderly,



there were few serious confrontations with police, and the communal imagery of concerts, religious services, and rousing speeches on the MUA side were readily contrasted to the wire, guard dogs, floodlights, and balaclava-clad security guards inside Patrick's terminals (McConville 2000, p. 405).

The work of the Glasgow University Media Group, in their studies of media depictions of coal miners' strikes in Margaret Thatcher's 1980s Britain (see Eldridge 1995), showed how important the media was in shaping public discourse about striking workers. Some years after television news coverage of this long-running dispute, viewers interviewed in focus groups had retained headlines and pithy phrases frequently used by news programs and extracted from public relations defined primary sources. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, television is still the dominant medium of political communication (perhaps soon to be supplanted by *You Tube* and the internet<sup>12</sup>), and that may be a reason why this production provoked so much discussion. In his *Popular Reality* book (1996), John Hartley argues that the media has replaced the role of the Church and public gatherings as the locus for public debate. Rather than seeing the media reporting or reproducing events that happen elsewhere in the public sphere, the media is a producer and shaper of these events (Hartley 1996, p. 124). Helen Trinca and Anne Davies, in recalled their coverage of the waterfront dispute in 1998, observe,

Reporting the story day in and day out... we found ourselves, like so many others, not just observers but players in the drama. What we wrote, what we chose to highlight, what we decided to include and to exclude and the tone we adopted had an impact on the way readers understood the story (Trinca & Davies 2000, p. xvii).<sup>13</sup>

Drawing on a model adapted from cultural semiotician Yuri Lotman's work, Hartley views the public sphere as nested, like a Russian doll, in a set of other spheres. The inner layer is

the domain of public communications, that is enclosed by the mediasphere, or the universe of media communications, which itself is enclosed by the semiosphere, that is the universe of elements used for language and communication (Hartley 1996, p. 106). Applying this model to *Bastard Boys* may assist in understanding the series' reception and the confusion of its role as documentation, rather than as dramatic fiction that explores ideas and emotions broadly linked to the actual events. Just as Bell found in his study of perceived bias in the ABC's coverage of the waterside events, it is not possible to separate the televisual representation of actual events from the semiotic space that surrounds them. The dispute powerfully represented a moment of change in Australia, not just on the waterfront but also in economic management via wages, and socio-political values and attitudes. As such, *Bastard Boys* operates as an intertextual mosaic of referents (Dovey 2002), triggering residual memories from actual events and/or media representations or depictions of those events as an underlay for the new interpretation of ideas raised by those events.

This intertextuality extends far further than the screen. German literary theorist Hans Robert Jauss proposed that a text can exist as an instance of literary history (1975), and that a reader engages a 'horizon of expectation' for understanding texts. This theory triangulates the author, the text and the audience, and highlights the intertextual associations made by readers. Texts are meaningful only in critical association – in conjunction, in comparison, in contrast – with other texts, Jauss asserts. These other texts share a set of assumptions, genre conventions, values and beliefs. A text is produced with the author intending specific meanings, but these meanings are changed – and therefore the text is changed – by the audience's interpretation of it, when read or viewed in a particular context that changes according to time and place. The horizons move, and are reconfigured, as the audience experience incorporates new texts and contexts. With *Bastard Boys*, these other texts include the news reports of the 1998 waterfront dispute, subsequent representations and interpretations, as well as the wider contemporary lives of the program's

viewers. Jauss contends that ‘a work is not an object that stands by itself ... it is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers’ (Jauss 1982, p.21).

The fact that *Bastard Boys* is a television production means that its conventions and stylistic techniques refer to those of the medium. Original TV news coverage employing the news selection criteria and preferred narrative devices such as conflict inevitably affect any subsequent representation of an event, particularly where the event has longevity via an extended period of news coverage. Warby and Morrison, in their IPA report, observe that the original dispute and its media coverage provided ample material for drama and:

The story was ideal for television—a cast of colourful characters, a developing plot with hints of sinister activities behind the scenes and, most importantly, conflict. TV news, more than any other news medium, craves visible confrontation and the waterfront dispute provided plenty: security guards, dogs, angry wharfies, clashes between union pickets, the police and truck drivers, farmers’ protests (Warby & Morrison 1999, p. 2).

It is significant that the *Bastard Boys* series employed the metaphoric hook of war, thereby establishing a binary oppositional approach.<sup>14</sup> Much of the (often masculinist) dialogue in the series employs a vocabulary of confrontation, describing battle lines, attack strategies and entrenched positions. Coombs describes a caller to the MUA who recounts seeing her nephew dressed in a digger’s hat, carrying a rifle and marching up and down the backyard to a chant, ‘We’re gonna fuck the wharfies’. This use of metaphors of war in the series was consistent with ABC news and current affairs thematic treatment in the reportage of the original event, according to the IPA report (Warby & Morrison 1999, p. 2). Indeed McConville’s 2000 study characterises the waterfront struggle as having been fought on

three terrains, an important one being the media, adding to the wharves and the courts (McConville 2000, p. 407). The storytelling devices exploited in *Bastard Boys* can be likened to television news insofar as news deals with certain newsworthiness selection criteria to ensure that a story can be reduced to essential elements while also employing the audiovisual address (such as gripping images and sound) to maintain the flow of programming. This means that historical detail is limited, and coverage of events and issues occurring over time is marginalised in preference for stories that emphasise immediacy and ‘new’ activities. Added to this, screen media are limited by duration.

So *Bastard Boys* works with these conventions, highlighting memorable moments that stand out in the mind’s eye, leaving the detail, full record of events and characters, and longer-term analysis to other media or cultural forms (such as Trinca and Davies’s book). Instead the emphasis is on impressions, personal recollections and the emotions surrounding events. Smith recalls that she became interested in television drama writing after realising that she was not attracted to journalism, given that, ‘Facts were a bit too hard for me,... I’d rather make stories up’ (cited in Walker 2006). In reading *Bastard Boys*, then, the frames of reference expand to include the mediated public and private spaces that surround this production; these include the political persuasions of the series’ viewers, the past and current representations of unions and governments, the long-standing attacks by the Coalition Government on the ABC, and—of particular interest to us and relevant to *Bastard Boys*—the multifaceted and prominent position that docu-dramas have played in Australian film and television.

## **V: Dramatising the Dispute**

UK researcher Derek Paget, in his 1990 discussion of ‘documentary drama on radio, screen and stage’ argues that dramatists as ‘recorders of history add their visual and aural inflections to that construction of the past which is “history”. By appropriating these documents, drama continues both to transgress its boundaries as “art”, and the documents’ claim to record’ (Paget 1990, p. 17). In his subsequent work, *No Other Way to Tell It* (1998), Paget further examines the vexed issue for critics and ambiguities for viewers of television drama documentaries. He scrutinises John Grierson’s oftquoted definition as the ‘creative treatment of actuality’ (Paget 1998, p. 116) to assist his definition of drama and documentary forms. Ultimately, Paget argues, in the post-1980s period in which television formats are increasingly influenced by fiction film techniques, docudrama is not a hybrid (or indeed a ‘mongrel’ or ‘bastard’) form but rather ‘a format in its own right’ (Paget 1998, p. 3). While ‘unstable’ as a genre, what it offers is a form that seeks ‘to satisfy the needs of popular audiences both for an intellectual understanding of the phenomenal world and for affective “windows into behaviour”’ (Paget 1998, p. 211).

Factual-fiction, the realist docu-drama, is a now commonplace stylistic device in Australian post-Revival screen production. The limits of fact and fiction are extended; they are blended using various techniques, such as: the embodiment of many people’s characteristics into a few personalities; the use of archival or pseudo-archival film and television footage; and a political sub-text in the storytelling. Productions on political aspects of our recent history are notoriously provocative and controversial. Like *Bastard Boys*, the feature film *Balibo* (Robert Connolly, 2009) received critical acclaim and was lauded for its dramatic power, while being criticised for straying from certain historical truths. Connolly observed that ‘we scrutinise history through historians, journalists and through cinema. Cinema has been this amazing way of applying the blowtorch to historic events without the constraints of documentary’ (cited in Lobenstein 2009, p. 44).

Critics have commented on the ‘truth’ or otherwise of Australian television mini-series ever since *The Dismissal* that centred on a depiction of Gough Whitlam and an emotionally charged period of Australian political history. Terry Hayes, the producer of this 1983 production, wrote that the mini-series ‘had to find something beyond the politics, it had to transcend the politics’ (cited in Dell’Oso 1982; see also Griffen-Foley 2003). Similarly, Ray Quint said that he intended *Bastard Boys* to be ‘unadulterated drama not fantasised documentary’ (cited in Misiura 2006). He added, ‘There has been a lot of wonderful Australian drama that is introspective—essentially a group of characters exploring the permutations of the relationships between themselves—but what I was looking for was a story that was looking outwards, that made connections with the broader society’ (cited in ‘Hard Yakka’ 2007). The exact nature of these connections is not clearly defined. Inevitably, any media product is tailored to its publisher outlet. As Errington and Miraglotta outline, ‘Audiences consume media products and services, the proprietors supply the content that audiences demand, while the government determines and shapes the environment in which key stakeholders operate’ (Errington & Miraglotta 2007, p. 17).

The role of the ABC as the (partially) state-funded broadcaster to contribute to debate over government processes is a contentious one. Played alongside industrial relations conflicts, the ABC is an obvious target for accusations of bias. One of the dangers of a production like Quint’s is that the people whose actions are dramatised are still alive and in power in government and big business (unlike the *Curtin* mini-series also screened on ABC-TV in 2007, or perhaps even *The King: the Story of Graham Kennedy* production, neither of which attracted as much flak as *Bastard Boys*).

Another precedent for *Bastard Boys* is the ABC/Roadshow Coote and Carroll co-produced mini-series *The True Believers*, directed by Peter Fisk in 1988 and depicting the 1950s split in the Australian Labor Party. Following this series broadcast, the ABC, as for *Bastard Boys*, was accused of twisting history to its own ideological needs, not just by screen critics, but by historians and by at least one of those portrayed in the mini-series. B.A. Santamaria denounced the production as a 'high-level political coup' (Santamaria 1989) and Ian McGarrity, Acting Director of Television of ABC, responded that:

criticism is even more likely to occur when history is dramatised in order to entertain as well as to inform... what the drama hopes to achieve is a portrayal of historical events and personalities which, while perhaps not factual in every detail, will nevertheless convey the atmosphere and overall sense of events and personalities of the time...it is just one portrayal of the record of what happened (McGarrity 1989).

If we argue, as does historian Mia Treacey (2008), that history can be narrativised, partial and not necessarily definitive, then *Bastard Boys* can be deemed an 'historical' account falling within the generic boundaries of *literary* history. As Treacey argues, given the dearth of television productions based on Australian history, of necessity this series attracted attention. However, any historically-informed or -inspired story centred on industrial relations will be open to additional scrutiny from polarised positions. Furthermore, as McConville notes, 'There will always remain a debate about how far, at moments of major industrial conflict, the media shapes the reality of class relations and how much it reflects existing class outcomes of material conditions' (McConville 2000 p. 406).

Union and worker-related films are particularly in line for debate in terms of funding, screening and reception.<sup>15</sup> An event such as the 1998 waterfront dispute that divided national opinion so markedly (and relatively recently) cannot avoid strong reactions. Added to this, the ABC is particularly well known for producing stirring and striking drama works. Prior to its broadcast, director Ray Quint predicted that ‘the show will be under scrutiny by all sides. I hope we offend otherwise we’re not doing our job as dramatists’ (cited in ‘Courting Controversy’ 2006) and Sue Smith observed: ‘people probably expect it to be a piece of leftie-something, which is why we went to great pains to be not that’ (cited in Bodey 2006a, p. 6). Nevertheless, Quint was also quoted as claiming the work to offer ‘a balanced view’ (cited in Misiura 2006, p. 24). In the week or so after the screenings, the ABC strongly refuted the claims of bias. It is not clear (and perhaps impossible to unpack) the extent to which responses related to the drama or to recollections and emotions from the original media coverage of the dispute—or even to a broader political attitude towards a conservative political agenda. This complexity has been inflected in the debate about dramatisation and public/private memory of actual events.

Right from the first mention of the production in the local media, *Bastard Boys* was labelled a *drama*. To what extent this was a strategy to avoid litigation is a question for another arena. The broadcasters of *Bastard Boys* preface its screening with this disclaimer:

The drama *Bastard Boys* is a dramatised account of the 1998 waterfront dispute. While based on real people and events, the characters, conversations and events depicted are wholly or partly fictional and do not necessarily reflect actual people and events.



The claims to being a drama enable the producers to be removed from ‘truthfulness’ and the popular connection of history, fact and truth. It also enables a focus on individuals, idiosyncrasies and story minutiae.<sup>16</sup> Using such techniques, and despite the ‘drama’ claims, many aspects of its look, feel and affect are ‘documentary’ in approach. Indeed, its political standpoint is naturalised by a rhetoric of realism in the documentary filmic approach. The work succeeds in positioning viewers as if they were viewing a documentary. This is heightened by the inclusion of archival television footage (eg a Ray Martin interview extract and a Parliamentary sitting), the staged news broadcasts with actual newsreaders (Jennifer Byrne) interviewing the actors in character, the use of the actual docks for film locations as well as MUA and ACTU offices. Indeed, a tableau from the series, in which protestors are trying to protect children in their ranks from the crush of the group while police pull at the bodies of the protestors, closely replicates a photo that was printed on the front cover of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (and widely circulated via Reuters international news agency), and gained notoriety in one of the dispute’s emotive conversations about the striking workers bringing their families to the picket lines. Consequently, *Real Time* reviewer Chris Scanlon argues, the series ‘remains grounded in a no-man’s land, trying to portray the complexities of recent political history on a tiny canvas: not quite drama, not quite documentary, it never manages to free itself sufficiently from the events of 1998 to offer a deeper reflection on the implications of those tumultuous events on the country’ (Scanlon 2007).

As documentary theorist Bill Nichols contends in his discussion of truth claims, ‘traditionally the word documentary has suggested ... knowledge and fact’. However, he goes on to note, ‘the distinction between fact and fiction blurs when claims about reality get cast as narratives ... fiction directs our attention to the historical world in various ways, but documentary opens up a felt gap for the viewer between the representation and its historical referent for the viewer’ (Nicholls 1994, p. 1, ix and 48). So many of the documentary

indicators—the production markers like the hand-held camera, the non-presence of the filmmakers—are shared by drama today, and this further blurs the factual/fiction line for viewers and critics. Ray Quint observed that ‘I was never tempted to use documentary methods, I never wanted to use shaky cam and all that ... To me it's a purely dramatic piece about character and what's happening on the screen between those characters’ (cited in Misiura 2006, p. 24).

Quint and Sue Smith stated that ‘we want to make it clear the program is a drama, not a documentary, and was financed as such. The participants interviewed provided information and inspiration for dramatic characters’ (cited in Box 2007, p. 2). Smith extends this by noting: ‘It’s not the whole story and it’s only bits of the story told from certain bits of perspective and so there are vast parts of it that are untold, that may never be told. That will be remembered by individuals and us’. (sic) (cited in Treacey 2008, p. 145).

Miranda Dear, the Head of Drama at ABC-TV, claimed that ‘*Bastard Boys* was conceived, written and funded as a drama, not a documentary or a doco-drama. It is part of the ABC's charter to reflect Australian social, cultural and political life and we believe *Bastard Boys* has achieved this. It has successfully engaged our audience and begun the debate’ (cited in Kermond & Rumble 2007, p. 17). The lack of definition of ‘the debate’ in this context seems to reflect the difficulty for contemporary television—and perhaps especially the ABC—in providing sophisticated accounts of Australian political culture. Ultimately, it seems, the value of popular cultural artefacts for work and industrial relations lies in their ability to trigger debate. To what extent the debate is about the television production or backwash from historical events, rather than the bigger issues, is an important question in relation to the perceived success of *Bastard Boys*.

## Conclusion

Twelve years after the waterfront dispute events, three years after the broadcast of the television series, and at the end of Kevin Rudd-led Labor's first term in Federal government, it is timely to examine the entire context in which this mini-series has been produced and screened to understand its reception and value as a media and cultural product. The context includes other cultural products as well as the political debates about the dispute and broader IR issues. Residual impressions of the original event's media coverage seem to be a critical framework for reception of *Bastard Boys*.

Inevitably personal political views affect responses to media depictions, and it is not surprising that audiences have an emotional response to an emotionally loaded story, employing key dramatic elements of a cracking good yarn. But the dramatic elements do not operate in isolation, as 'pure fiction'. And the story has at least a passing connection to material circumstances of actual workers and workplaces (however much based in media representation from an event in the past). Perhaps the greatest significance of such stories is the relation of the media productions to everyday issues and policies of work, collective bargaining and dispute management. In this case, whatever the form and format of media stories about work—whether news, drama or reality TV—these products are beneficial. In her July 1998 article, Trinca suggested that, freed of the oppressive demands of the daily news story, it was timely—and, indeed, a challenge—to analyse issues underpinning the events earlier that year, such as 'reforms, job security, employer and employee responsibilities, and the nature of government' (Trinca, 2000, p. 33)

While narratively centred on a few sketchy or fictional antagonists, and a drama rather than a history, the series powerfully conveys political views and discursively addresses the operation of ideology in contemporary Australia. Abiding by the 'war' theme, the ultimate winner seemed to be the educated class who 'won' through the courts, in the moderated and legally centred ACTU approach to such capitalist incursions into union-based workforces, in the boardroom decision-making devoid of experience in the blue-collar workplace. While apparently giving most 'airtime' to union members, *Bastard Boys* does not show them unified in their approach to core values and work ethics, and this seems to reflect an Australian (perhaps global) dilemma in the new millennium, namely, the role of socialism and Left-Right politics. David McKnight opposes the 'cultural left' based on an educated middle class against a 'socialist left' based on trades unions (2005, p. 113). Through its union stories, *Bastard Boys* seemingly offers a 'cultural left' account by challenging the conservative agenda of Patricks and the Coalition government, while at the same time sympathetically portraying a critical representative character, Chris Corrigan, using drily comic dialogue and the 'last word' in the series. Focus on individual stories in the series seems to express the broader framework of change from worker based labour to internationally competitive Australian economy, a change that had been inevitable from the Keating government and was enthusiastically adopted by the Howard-led Coalition from their election into office in early 1996. As Johnson opines, while Keating offered grand visions of cultural transformation for Australia, Howard focused on the narrower picture, especially the (conservative) battler and the individual freed from collective bargaining (Johnson 2000, p. 101).

The critical media dilemma raised by *Bastard Boys* is to what extent these problems come under the spotlight through the producer's choice of genre in treating 'actuality'. If the 1998 waterfront dispute had been represented in a recognisable documentary format, there is no

guarantee that it would have created less controversy or fewer accusations of partisanship, although it may not have achieved such a broad viewing audience. In attempting a generically mutable format for an event that had such import for the Australian public, *Bastard Boys* was possibly over-ambitious in its partially retrospective journey that simultaneously evoked significant socio-political issues for the present and future. In the case of *Bastard Boys*, the ‘noise’ generated about bias, balance and drama, and the oppositional battlefield depicted, may have distracted from broader issues relevant to the future. In the post-Howard era, with the Rudd Labor government calling for wage restraint and economic conservatism, a re-presentation of the past may assist in developing a vision for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Including the ABC *Four Corners* special ‘Webb of Intrigue’, broadcast 9 March 1998, which achieved a healthy audience of 680,000.

<sup>2</sup> *Bastard Boys* was also repeated in 2009, weekly from 13 January to 3 February at a later 9.30pm timeslot.

<sup>3</sup> The copyright charge to use the original recording was prohibitively expensive and Jon Stevens, former singer of Noiseworks, was employed to record a version of the song, which he chose to sing in a style relatively true to the original. This song was in Smith’s original script. Thanks to Ray Quint and composer Jan Preston for this information, presented at an AGSC/ASDA event at Trackdown Studios, Sydney, Wednesday Feb 17, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Lyrics from ‘War!’ song, written by Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong as an anti-Vietnam War protest song, recorded on the Motown label by The Temptations but largely popularized through the Edwin Starr recording released in 1970.

<sup>5</sup> The scene in *Bastard Boys* of children in the middle of a rowdy union blockade recreated an infamous front-page photograph in a Sydney broadsheet. See David Gray’s photograph of young Nakita and Hayley Mitchell (daughters of a protestor), accompanying the article by Matthew Russel and Les Kennedy (1998). Likewise, the program’s images of guard dogs inside port facilities, along with balaclava-clad guards, recreate scenes from Australian news and current affairs programs of the dispute.

<sup>6</sup> Additional reception studies into general audience responses (eg via focus groups, broad sample surveys) were not within the remit of this research, although some such responses are accessible through blogs, for example, *Sydney Morning Herald* and ABC.

<sup>7</sup> Positive indicators included ‘outstanding’, ‘compelling’, and ‘superb’, pointed to the production’s ‘authenticity’ and noted that the production was made ‘with the cooperation of all parties to the dispute’. Negative indicators indicated ‘boring and predictable’, ‘tedious and disappointing’, ‘biased’, and ‘historically inaccurate’.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, *Boys’ Own Fantasy*.

<sup>9</sup> For two instances of this, see ABC tackles docks row, and Koch.

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<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Clare Fletcher, Program Coordinator, The Walkley Foundation, for provision of this article from back issues.

<sup>11</sup> The contradictions inherent in this position were cleverly depicted in political cartoons in *The Australian*, *Australian Financial Review* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

<sup>12</sup> It is notable how, in 1998, the dispute was played out through Internet news circulation and sympathetic websites.

<sup>13</sup> These *Sydney Morning Herald* journalists were nominated for a Walkley award for their coverage of the dispute.

<sup>14</sup> This was also mobilized by Trinca and Davies, and in fact was also employed in original media coverage of the events. However, it was a core theme in many elements used in *Bastard Boys*.

<sup>15</sup> One instance is *Amongst Equals*, where the ACTU had control over the content of the film, and never approved Tom Zubrycki's completed version for release or screening. In an earlier time, the openly left-wing films of the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit and the Realist Film Association were generally only able to find screenings outside the mainstream circuits.

<sup>16</sup> Trinca and Davies note the 'stranger than fiction' aspects of the dispute, and this is highlighted in the cover line by Phillip Adams, claiming the book to be 'the most thrilling thriller since *The Maltese Falcon*.'

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