Suburbia Verité

Sylvania Waters: Some loved it, some hated it, everyone watched it anyway.

Graeme Turner peers behind the extraordinary response to ABC TV’s ‘real life soap’.

A mark of the quality of Philip Adams’ communication skills is his improbable success in convincing Australia to see him as its all-purpose intellectual. Maybe it is the black skivvy, or the beard, or the unlikely mixture of populism and existentialism, but he is always getting wheeled in by the serious end of the media to offer short grabs on just about everything. So it was not surprising recently to see Philip Adams turn up on Lateline telling Kerry O’Brien how ordinary Australians were reacting to Sylvania Waters. Nor was it surprising to hear the man who brought us Bazza McKenzie sing the praises of this latest representation of the ugly Australian. “Noelene,” he said, “is fabulous: I am thinking of starting up a Noelene fan club.”

The public and critical reception of Sylvania Waters is a lot like that which surrounded The Adventures of Barry McKenzie. Critics, eminent personalities, writers of letters to the editor and the like have made quite a fuss, objecting to the image of Australians created in the program and to the effect it might have on ‘what people overseas’ think of us. These are performances from a pretty well developed genre of Australian cultural criticism by now; it makes its appearance, usually, when a particularly populist and unflattering set of representations appear on the big or small screen. While nobody worried that Picnic at Hanging Rock might have portrayed Australia as a land where girls walked in slow motion, rocks could make you disappear without reason, and a traffic in St Valentine’s Day messages between schoolgirls was the major form of sexual transaction, there was certainly concern that people might think we were all like Mick ‘Crocodile’ Dundee.

It was hard to have much patience with such ideas when Bazza was around; it is even harder to have much patience with it now. For a start, ‘people overseas’ think very little about us at all; even the enormous success of The Adventures of Barry McKenzie in Britain was at least as much due to the numbers of Australians in London as to British interest in Australians on film. In any case, since Australians all know that what we see on film and television is not real, it is a fair bet ‘people overseas’ know that too. The way in which television images are connected with and subject to other forms of representation was graphically demonstrated when A Current Affair mischievously showed a preview of Sylvania Waters to a ‘typical’ English family in Britain. They hated Noelene and found Australian attitudes laughable, but they also said the sunshine made them want to emigrate.

Arguments about the appropriate image of Australia to present overseas are only possible if one feels sure that one’s own version of the ‘appropriate’ or ‘typical’ is the right one. The policing of Australian content that so marked the funding and reception of Australian films of the 70s and early 80s was about specifying an image of Australia, censoriously restricting the mythologies upon which our movies drew. The furore around Sylvania Waters is, among other things, evidence that nothing much has changed.

Of course, it is true that the wealthy lifestyle Noelene and Laurie enjoy is a long way from anyone’s idea of typical. But what is remarkable about the program is that while Noelene and Laurie may not be typical they are certainly recognisable. I haven’t met anyone who wants to start up a fan club for Noelene, but I have met plenty who find her painfully, irresistibly familiar. The characters who wander through Sylvania Waters offer tremendous potential for licensed, often pleasurable, voyeurism, precisely because they are quotations from our everyday lives.

I wouldn’t want to push this reality effect too far, however. Kerry O’Brien’s interview placed the Sylvania Waters ‘phenomenon’ within the genre of ‘reality television’, the new, ever-cheaper, ever-trashier programming format which brought us Cops, Hard Copy and Murder Squad. (Murder Squad is currently the only British example on our screens, but it is just as worryingly intrusive, despite the respectfully modulated voice-over.) I would reject this connection. First of all, ‘reality television’ is something of a beat-up anyway. The term dignifies a raft of poorly structured current affairs programs which are the way they are because they are cheaper like that, not because they offer us a fresh, unmediated view of the world. ‘Reality television’ is still television; it is no more real and no less constructed than a quiz show. As for the innovativeness and adventurousness disingenuously invoked in descriptions of the format, it is worth noting that the raw material of reality television so far is overwhelmingly drawn from those who are too powerless, too poor, or too distressed to prevent their predicaments being turned into entertainment.

Sylvania Waters, however, can’t even lay claim to the dubious alibi of ‘reality television’. The show is structured like soap opera, given its narrative shape by the youngest son’s voice-over, and edited with a great deal of thematic motivation. Indeed, among the implausibilities of the show’s production history is the pretence that it was ever anything but highly constructed.

When the British producers came out to promote Sylvania Waters, they delivered a load of nonsense to a gullible Australian media about its being
'fly on the wall' television, an attempt to capture and document the everyday. A venerable tradition of earlier quasi-ethnographic documentaries (Family, the Seven-Up series) was invoked as the appropriate genre model. This was deliberately misleading. In visual style, Sylvania Waters owes as much to Dynasty as to Seven-Up, and its intention is obviously to provide a detailed critique of Australian society ordered around a tight narrative structure. Signs of this structure are all over the place. The producers are particularly fond of the meaningful cross-cut, moving repeatedly between two locations in order to indicate some similarity between them. When the family Christmas dinner was being consumed, for instance, we cut between the people eating their food, and the dogs eating theirs. Not subtle, you'd agree—nor was it the viewpoint of some detached but observant 'fly on the wall'.

When Peter Couchman dealt with Sylvania Waters, he considered it as a soap opera—he asked soap stars to come along and talk about it and about their own work. The two 'battlers' from Sylvania Waters, Paul and Dione (they're the ones whom most people actually like, unless they know Philip Adams), were there too. They revealed, deliciously, what we all suspected: that much of the show (up to 25%, they said) was set-up by the producers, that sequences were edited out of chronological order, that certain sequences were repeated (and thus placed into a context that was months away from when the actions first occurred), and topics of conversation were occasionally initiated by the crew, not the families involved. This doesn't, in my view, make it that much less 'real'; it does establish, though, that the show's producers misrepresented its actual objectives and methods.

It is pretty clear that the concept for the show is firmly grounded in British conceptions of Australian life. The Poms are going to love it, since it strokes all their prejudices about Australians' uncouth materialism. To the extent that some of us might also harbour prejudices about classes of Australian life to which we think we no longer belong, we too have found it fascinating. There's more to it than that, though. Watching Sylvania Waters involves witnessing the survival of values and attitudes we thought were either gone or at least sufficiently stigmatised not to be deliberately expressed in public. We respond with outrage and shock—but also with keen amusement, a tolerance that can border on nostalgia. But we can't pretend we don't recognise what we see on the screen.

It is as if Sylvania Waters is helping us to remember earlier versions of the 'Australian character'—versions most of us would rather forget—and
remind us they are still around. What is particularly eloquent, and shocking in its own right, is the characters' absolute self-confidence, the assurance with which their values are held and invoked. It is impossible not to be deeply impressed by the categoric certainty of Laurie's account of his stepson, Michael's, motivations, for instance, or by Noelene's complete lack of self-doubt. Watching her, I was repeatedly reminded of one of Magda Szubanska's characters in Fast Forward: the chain-smoking, heavily made-up office worker whose children are abandoned to all kinds of misfortune while she wearily complains about their ingratitude.

Unlike most soap opera, however, Sylvania Waters does get harder to watch. I find it increasingly uncomfortable precisely because it demonstrates the hardiness of social myths and prejudices, how old attitudes die hard. In some of the conversations, we do hear the conventional public voice of a contemporary, liberal-democratic Australia. But always insistently elbowing its way in is a much less tolerant, democratic, and pluralistic set of views. Sylvania Waters is often just plain ugly, because the ideologies which surface in ‘private’ conversations and behaviours are unrepentantly consumerist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, and sexist. In contrast to the material sophistication of their resort-style way of life, what these people say makes them seem like they just stepped off the set of Married with Children—only this is no sitcom. The result, for many viewers I have talked to, is major embarrassment. Noelene's expression of pride in her lust for a black stripper, a pride that is actually fuelled rather than undercut by her racism, gets my vote as one of the most embarrassing moments in Australian television.

Australian television has a strong tradition of the exploitation of embarrassment—from Norman Gunston to Perfect Match to Red Faces. But it's never been quite like this. In the past, the 'ordinary Australian' has largely been left off the hook. Even our sitcoms have been relatively tactful in comparison with those of other national TV industries. The Australian television industry has not produced the equivalent of Till Death Us Do Part, or All in the Family—sharply satirical but ultimately tolerant representations of lumpen regressive-ness—until now. (The closest we got was probably Kingswood Country.) The worry is that while All in the Family relied on scripts performed by professional actors before an audience, Sylvania Waters involves members of the middle class performing renditions of their everyday life for the sole benefit of seeing themselves on TV. Where the worry turns to fascination is that the performances not only establish the differences between them and us, they also make it hard to deny the similarities.

Relief from this discomfort is on its way, however. At least one commercial channel is producing its own version of Sylvania Waters to counter the ABC, and to avoid surrendering a whole genre of television to the competition. The sharp edge is clearly going to get duller when we face an evening with 'suburba verité' on all channels, offering us the choice of Sylvania Waters, Killarney Heights, Green Valley and Sanctuary Cove. Thank God, SBS can't afford to produce its own.

GRAEME TURNER teaches in English at the University of Queensland. He is co-author of Myths of Oz (Allen and Unwin).

**Cultural Football**

The treasures of Angkor Wat are in Canberra: how they got there is a complicated story. Jeremy Eccles explains.

Culture as a political football is a metaphor that we don't often encounter in white Australia, where football is so much more important than the arts, education and history that it usually appropriates all the best imagery. Will we ever compare the flashing elegance of the 'Macedonian Marvel' Peter Daicos to a Zofrea? The positional sense of Mark Ella to Rover Thomas? Or the curving runs of Brett Kenny to Brett Whiteley?

There are, of course, pros and cons to the notion. But, to encounter the arts of a country that matter so much that its hopes and aspirations can be directly linked to its temples, its statues and its bronzes is an inspiring experience. Cambodia is the country in question; the great temple of Angkor Wat is the image that appears on its flag; and 35 of its artistic treasures have left the country for the first time ever for Canberra, on a journey that has a variety of (mainly political) motives.

Perhaps the first thing to insist upon is that the treasures are worth seeing for purely aesthetic reasons. The sheer youthfulness of the faces and bodies of the Khmer statuary will be my most lasting impression of this glorious work, made between the sixth and 13th centuries AD.; the youth, and the beauty of the very human models, compared to the more stylized work being done elsewhere in Asia at the same time. The gods are the same - Buddha, Vishnu, Krishna, and so on. But the royal princess whose likeness was used for the Buddhist goddess of Perfect Wisdom is recognisably a child before she is divine; the seventh century standing Buddha has liquid drapery covering its youthfully swelling tummy; and the tenderly meditative stone Head of Jayavarman VII - both King and Buddha - forever seals in his youth a King who may have reigned into his 90s.

But the politics were there from the start. Indian traders allowed the mon-