

WOMEN WORKING OUT



"Fit but feminine": Lisa Curry

The fit body, rather than the slim body, marked the eighties' feminine ideal. For Annette Corrigan, the women's fitness boom evokes mixed feelings.

In the past, the idea of Australian women in sport has usually meant women sitting on the sidelines and cheering, running the canteen or making the uniforms for the weekend fixtures. Lack of opportunities, resources, support and visibility for women has created a picture of sporting participa-

tion in this country as largely a male activity.

However, some degree of social change has taken place in the last two decades. Just as women have moved into a whole range of public and male-dominated spheres in the wake of second-wave feminism, they have also entered the gymnasium, run onto the tracks, fields and courts, dived into the pools and started 'working out'. Increased opportunities for women to

play sport and become physically active have, to some extent, eradicated beliefs that women are physically weak and incapable of strenuous activity and athletic achievement.

Even so, equality is far from attained. Recent government reports revealed that women's sport receives only 5% of the media coverage given to men's sport and only one-tenth of the sponsorship money. With figures like this, women's sporting gains seem like a drop in the ocean compared with how far there is to go. And while professional sporting women are hampered by lack of resources and support for their careers, many average women are still dogged by the lack of time, finance, childcare and transport which have always confined women's activities to the home. In many ways it is still a minority of women who have the privilege of experiencing the physical and psychological benefits of regular exercise.

Furthermore, despite some hard-won gains, women have still not escaped the kinds of pressures which feminists have argued are fundamental to women's unequal and unfair treatment in society. That is, female athletes are still subject to pressures to display acceptable markers of their femininity as they participate in sport, or to take up physical activity in ways that will enhance their sexual attractiveness.

Nowhere is this better exemplified than in media representations of female athletes. Take, for example, Lisa Curry. She's a jolly good swimmer all right but we must also be constantly reminded that she has the qualifications of a real woman. She's a mum, indeed she's a supermum! Jane Flemming. Now there's an athlete! What a runner, jumper and thrower she is! Yes, but isn't she sexy while she's doing it? Appearing in skimpy two-piece outfits that emphasise her strong shapely legs and firm buttocks, small hips and waist and well-defined shoulders and arms. Michelle Baumgartner. She recently complained that if she didn't fix her hair or do her nails before appearing on the track, criticisms of her appearance would

dominate the media coverage of her athletic performances.

Is this kind of media treatment harmless? Is it perhaps even a bonus for these athletes as it increases their profiles and gives them something to be noted for? Or could it be that this kind of consistent reference to the sexuality of female athletes is symptomatic of a certain cultural anxiety which ensues when women encroach on territory that was once the preserve of men only?

The latter suggestion would seem to be supported if we look at female athletes who have quite radically challenged or transgressed traditional gender boundaries through sport. Such women have been subject to discrimination, harassment and invasion of their privacy. For instance, powerlifter and athlete-turned-bodybuilder Bev Francis has endured such treatment for daring to make herself as powerful and strong as she could be. Although this was her aim, her womanhood was called into question when on one occasion she was deemed too 'masculine' to compete against other women bodybuilders. Clearly Bev had gone too far. The underlying message in such a decision was that no real woman could ever make herself look like that and no real woman would ever shun respectable or acceptable femininity as completely as she did.

Similar assumptions operate in the case of female Olympic athletes who have had to undergo hormonal tests to prove they are truly women and not some testosterone-tainted mutants. Why is it that if women go 'too far' in their sport, then they have to prove who they really are? No comparable tests requiring male athletes to prove their masculinity have been imposed upon men. Could this double standard indicate that while sportsmen are considered normal, sportswomen are still some species of deviants?

Highlighting women's sexuality and using it to evaluate them as athletes is a discriminatory practice. In the cases of athletes like Curry and Flemming who meet acceptable standards of femininity, such a practice functions as reassurance that even though women are playing sports—something we have for so long understood as masculine activities—they are still women after all. In the cases of athletes like Bev

Francis and other women bodybuilders whose radical body transformations frequently evoke alarm and horror, the cultural investments in maintaining gender boundaries through appearance are even more noticeable.

If these are the cultural dynamics that affect professional female athletes in the spotlight, how might they affect ordinary, everyday girls who just want to have some fun, enjoy some exercise and feel all the better for it? Well, not only are many of these girls off to the gym but they are going there decked out in colour co-ordinated, form-hugging lycra tights and leotards, accessorised with matching head and wrist bands and often with a made-up face to complete the glamorous look.

Some gyms even designate certain areas and machines for men or women only, with the women's areas decorated, lit or designed to include some 'feminine' touches—plants, white machines, pink carpet and soft lighting. Such separation and differentiation can be very comforting for all parties as it reinstates sexual difference in a previously masculine environment which has been 'invaded' by women. However, the sexual differentiation of physical activity does not just end with appearances in the gym. Sport and exercise also mean different things for men and women.

Participation in sport and physical activity in many ways represents a positive step for women. Fit women are taking pleasure in their physical selves. They are enjoying the feelings of physical competence, of feeling alive and well, feeling energetic and having the resources to cope with stress. Going off to the gym to do something for themselves is quite a significant statement of autonomy and independence in light of women's traditional role as the nurturers of others—particularly men and children. Moreover, increased opportunities for women to become fit and strong helps counter traditional images of women as weak and helpless.

Yet many women are also motivated to exercise by anxieties about their physical appearance. The desire to look slim and attractive is strong. They know if they look good, they feel good. However, it is often a hate and loathing rather than a love of their female

bodies with their soft curves and fleshy bulges that drives women into the gyms. For some obsessive exercisers, missing a workout or gaining a kilogram can signal a personal and moral failure as they have been unable to maintain strict control over their bodies.

This type of evidence would seem to contradict the idea that engaging in physical activity has been a liberating experience for women. Perhaps they have broken free of one set of constraints only to be subject to a new set based on the idea that to be truly feminine is to be slim, fit, beautiful and sexy? Perhaps exercise has simply become another corset designed to shape women's bodies so they look attractive for men?

Like their anorexic sisters, many exercising women are trying to lose weight, abolish fat and become smaller and leaner. Interestingly, men cite the opposite motivation for working out. Far from striving to diminish their bodies, many men use exercise to build muscles, make themselves bigger, to take up more space, to become powerful and strong, even imposing.

Some sportswomen are redefining their bodies and their femininity to include strength and muscularity, yet for most exercising women, acquiring visible muscle is carefully monitored to produce 'tone' and 'definition' rather than 'bulk' or 'bulges'. The language is significant for it highlights the limits which surround women's experimentation with something which has for so long signified a gender distinction.

Are women who push these limits abandoning their femininity and becoming surrogate men? Or are these women challenging the current limits of femininity and contributing to a redefinition of its meaning in our culture? Certainly anorexics and women bodybuilders are displaying bodies which do not conform to acceptable standards of what female bodies should look like. In this sense such women are not pursuing feminine ideals designed to please men. Perhaps the bodily obsessions of some exercising women can be interpreted similarly?

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AUTEUR EGO

Bronwyn Barwell and Ian Milliss take issue with Tom Zubrycki's latest film and argue the ACTU was right to ban it.

Most people entering the media debate surrounding the film *Amongst Equals* have blithely accepted film maker Tom Zubrycki's contention that the ACTU has actively attempted to censor the film. In doing so they have overlooked other questions, which we believe have greater importance for films like *Amongst Equals*. Questions like: who should control the content of a client commissioned film; and how should the ACTU set about promoting unionism? It is to such issues that we address ourselves here, as Tom Zubrycki's selective version of the events surrounding the production have been refuted already by both Film Australia and the ACTU.

Amongst Equals is no better or worse than Tom Zubrycki's other films. His stream-of-consciousness approach hasn't changed over the years, nor has his focus on the individual rather than the collective—the spectacle of events with no analysis of factors invisible to the camera. His moral indignation about the ACTU's rejection of the film is not a publicity ploy—he genuinely feels he has right on his side. And herein lies the problem: Tom Zubrycki does not have a good understanding of the trade union movement or its members, and his approach does not lend itself to either collaborative filmmaking or a serious critical analysis of the development of unionism in Australia.

Unions above all else are about process, about issues, about collective decision-making. They are constantly changing organisms, responding to the economic and social conditions at

the time. The issues of ten, 20 or 50 years ago are not the issues of today. *Amongst Equals* does not provide an understanding of this and as such is a disservice to and misrepresentation of the union movement. To quote from a union review of the film in the NSW Public Service Association's Journal:

The ACTU only had to look at Zubrycki's film on the SEQEB dispute, *Friends and Enemies*, to see he doesn't have a high opinion of union officials.

And that, dare I say it, is what is missing from this film. There are no union officials, there are no union organisations, there is none of the bureaucratic slog of putting together a wage claim, or keeping membership records, or attending countless uneventful meetings, and so on.

Large slabs of the union movement are missing. The conservative unions are missing. The groupers are missing. The Laborites are missing prior to 1971. The politics are missing.

The events portrayed are undoubtedly bits of labour history, but that hasn't made them a history of trade unions.

People viewing this film could not get a sense of what unions are, what they are doing, and how they are doing it.

This portrayal of unions may appeal to those who hark back to simpler days when confrontation was the only effective *modus operandi* and to the fringe dwellers of the union movement who have been unable to come to grips with the need to understand union issues in terms of Australia's international competitiveness and who feel disenfranchised as a result. It will not appeal to those people whom the union movement desperately needs, the 57% of non-unionised workers, mostly either young, female or from non-English-speaking back-

grounds. The ACTU's own research shows that these workers do not identify with, and in fact are repulsed by, the only image they get of trade unionism, the image pushed by both the mass media and Tom Zubrycki—male, blue collar and violent.

To name a few more of its shortcomings: the censorship of all rightwing union viewpoints; the negativity of the voiceover; the pedestrian chronological approach which does nothing to explain the dynamics of trade unionism; the concentration on the strikes and confrontations beloved of mainstream media; the incredible failure to cover the Accord or to come to grips with the complex issues which have dominated union concern for the last decade.

Tom Zubrycki explains much of this away by saying the film is not finished, that the cuts requested by the ACTU have ruined it. But the failures of the film are too many and begin with its very structure. These are not problems that can be laid at the feet of the ACTU.

There is no question about who is the legal holder of copyright in the case of *Amongst Equals*: the ACTU as the commissioning body is clearly the holder. Zubrycki, however, argues that the contribution of some cultural workers gives them a moral right of ownership over a commissioned film which transcends the commissioning organisation's intellectual property rights. He's again attempting to appropriate the moral high ground. The ACTU's rejection of the film is presented as censorship, as an example of organised labour (in this case the ACTU) conspiring with government (in this case Film Australia) to victimise and silence the individual (in this case Tom Zubrycki). This theme—heroic struggle against institutionalised power in the name of truth—is seen in many of his films, as well as many a Hollywood blockbuster and many a Derryn Hinch exposé.

Tom has made much of his claim to be the originator of the idea. Leaving aside legal niceties such as the facts



Photos: Tribune newspaper

Protests, arrests, marches: Zubrycki's film shows a "concentration on the strikes and confrontation beloved of mainstream media".

that you cannot hold copyright in an idea, only its physical expression, and that the same general idea had been floated on many occasions, we come to the more important notion that, to the degree that anyone can own it, surely history is owned by those who enacted it, in this case the members of the union movement and their democratically elected representatives.

As much as Tom Zubrycki might not like it, the ACTU does represent trade union members, in all their various and wondrous political positions. Tom Zubrycki, on the other hand, represents himself and possibly the brand of filmmakers who, with egos inflated by auteur theory, believe their personal interpretation of issues should override the interpretation of those actively involved in the issues.

It could be said that there is an unhealthy climate in the independent film scene whose members, having largely come from the student Left of the 60s

and 70s and imbued with the slogans of that period, still believe their own political perspective is formed with a greater and truer understanding of the way things are and the way they should be. This view is untempered by the reality of living in a consensus democracy and refuses to recognise the validity of any system of accountability outside their peer group. There is an attitude that making cultural products in a collective situation is not only impossible but also unsound.

How then did this peculiarly Australian development of the auteur theory of filmmaking come about? Firstly, it is particularly evident among filmmakers trained by Australian Film, Television and Radio School who now commonly run media studies courses in other tertiary institutions.

Secondly, it has been fostered by the Australian Film Commission through a grant system which favours in-

dividual filmmakers by specifically excluding organisations. This system, in which the filmmaker's career is dependent not on developing an audience or a clientele, but rather on the approval of the clique which controls funding, has consistently, albeit tacitly, encouraged filmmakers in the belief that films are always the product of individual creative endeavour and that the needs of the audience or the client are irrelevant.

There are cultural workers, community arts practitioners, musicians, writers and other filmmakers who don't share this view and have managed to produce works which both satisfy the commissioning organisation and the cultural worker. To name a few examples involving unions: Elizabeth Knight's commissioned history of the Waterside Workers Federation, *Wharfies*, which successfully covers much of the same ground as *Amongst Equals*; there have been hundreds of projects by community artists working within the framework of the Art and Working Life Program; we ourselves have worked on a wide range of union projects without any of the problems Tom Zubrycki claims to have encountered.

Good film making is a collaborative process to which both the filmmaker

and the client bring pre-conceptions. The art lies in producing a product that reflects the viewpoint and needs of the client while using the filmmaker's talent to express diversity of opinion in a non-judgmental manner, allowing viewers to reach their own conclusions. This does not mean reducing a work to the lowest common denominator: it does mean producing works which express more than the limited viewpoint of the filmmaker.

Tom Zubrycki has accused the ACTU of wanting to turn the film into "a public relations exercise" meaning, presumably, that they were concerned with the film's impact on the public. The statement is more an illustration of the contempt which independent filmmakers have for the audience than a criticism of the ACTU.

But it does raise the issue of the ACTU's image. The ACTU and the union movement in general has a bad media image which must be addressed. Surveys conducted by the union movement have consistently shown that most union members are happy with their own union but believe everybody else's union is irresponsible, greedy, whatever. Their attitude to their own union is based on direct experience, their attitude to other unions is based on the mass media.

The union movement's past failure to come to grips with cultural issues and their reluctance to see cultural and media activities as an integral part of trade union activity has contributed to this problem. The union movement has failed to educate and politicise both its members and non-members about the value and role of trade unions. The production of this film was seen as an opportunity to present a broader view of the role of unionism, to raise the level of debate above the mass media's constant harping on strikes. It was particularly important that the film should reach those workers whom the union movement has largely failed to attract or understand—women, youth and migrants.

The ACTU, being inexperienced in the film medium, clearly believed that by employing Film Australia it was making a conservative but responsible decision that would achieve this objective. This inexperience also showed in the ACTU's early underestimation of the film's structural problems, problems that could not be dealt with by the subtraction or addition of images, which appears to be the manner in which disagreements were dealt with by both Tom Zubrycki and the ACTU.

Film Australia must share the blame. Unlike the ACTU, they are experienced in film production, and particularly films for clients. As project

manager it was their responsibility to both monitor the progress of the film and ensure Tom Zubrycki was working to the brief. The film should never have got to the shooting stage until the issues of concern expressed by the ACTU had been addressed.

The ACTU is now developing a more sophisticated approach to marketing trade unions and their role. It is taking heed of its own market research and developing a concerted communication strategy which is specifically aimed at attracting non-unionised workers. Union structures are also being modified to ensure that these groups of workers are able to participate effectively.

Most unions now recognise that the most effective mechanism available to counter the constant mass media propaganda is the development of their own internal media. This will be dependent on the involvement of cultural workers who see their role as facilitating the expression of a range of viewpoints other than their own. If this can occur union media may provide the long awaited alternative to the mass media, a development which will be of great benefit to the broad Left.

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FREEZE FRAME

Tom Zubrycki responds with a defence of his film and a broadside against the ACTU.

As Judy Adamson said in her introduction to *Amongst Equals* at the pirate screening of the film at the Australian Film Institute: "It's not a good time for truth in Australia." The public row over the film *Amongst Equals* has clearly demonstrated that organisations like the ACTU seem to be more concerned with their own

self-image than with the principle of artistic integrity. Any comments on the film, especially any analysis of its content, must therefore be set in context with the history of its production and the issues raised by the ACTU's attempted suppression of it.

The story starts in 1986 at the time I was finishing the film on the SEQEB strike, *Friends and Enemies*. It occurred

to me then that there was a strong demand for educational A/V materials on the history of the labour movement. Nobody had done this kind of 'birds-eye-view' before. It also seemed an obvious subject for prime time television. I was aware of good sources of archival film that would situate this history well in a cultural, political and economic context.

I approached the ACTU with no success, but was able to get the support of Film Australia who in turn obtained funds from the Australian Bicentennial Authority. It's at this point that the problems started. The ABA made a grant of \$200,000 to the ACTU on condition that Film Australia act as the

film's producer. The problem was that the copyright, along with the grant, went to the ACTU. This meant that the ACTU would have the final say on the content of the film. Officially (and legally) I had to answer to an ACTU-appointed committee comprising officials from different unions: a group that was supposedly "factionally balanced". Morally, however I felt my responsibility was also to the potentially large television audience. The various agreements between the parties clearly stipulated that the film would be a "critical appraisal of the trade union movement in Australia suitable for a general audience on prime-time television". No provision was made for arbitration in case a dispute arose. In retrospect it was naive of me to believe that when it came to the final decisions, the committee would defer to my professional integrity.

For three months in 1987 I travelled around Australia consulting a wide range of labour historians and veterans of the movement, before eventually writing the script. The Melbourne-based committee was consulted, and with some minor changes the script was approved. Later that year the film went into production. By March 1988 the films were completed to my and Film Australia's satisfaction. They were edited down to three half-hour segments. The first dealt with the period 1850-1939, the second 1939-1972, and the third covered 1972 to the present. In its edited form, the series diverged very little from the initial script.

The 'rough cut' was sent down to the ACTU and a letter came back with some suggested changes. They appeared to be relatively minor ones which we accommodated by altering the narration. A week later a 'fine cut' was sent to Melbourne. (In film terminology a 'fine cut' is very close to the final version!) This time, however, we were asked to attend a meeting because new changes were to be proposed. It was at this meeting that the committee expressed their real concerns about the film—ones that were at total odds with the approved script.

They specifically objected to references to the Communist Party as an organising force among unionists



Zubrycki intended "to make a critical appraisal of the trade union movement, not an official history".

during the Depression; the portrayal of the 1971 Ford strike (where migrant workers staged a five-week strike because of a simple language error on the part of their union officials); insufficient references to the Accord and the arbitration process. Why hadn't these concerns been voiced earlier? We already felt we had compromised some of the film's narration, but we wanted to draw the line against dropping any actual sequences. I suggested to Film Australia that we employ, as historical consultant, Jim Hagan, Dean of Arts at Wollongong University and author of the official history of the ACTU.

With Hagan's involvement two more re-cuts were done to produce something we all felt satisfied would accommodate the ACTU concerns and also meet the standards of historical accuracy. Personally, I was unhappy with the edit. Repeated requests by the ACTU to 'put things in a more positive light' had the effect of romanticising the narration. Failure to allow us to do a critical analysis of the Accord made Part 3 seem like propaganda for the ACTU.

It was then that Simon Crean became involved. He wanted a total restructuring of all three programs. The *Sydney Morning Herald* said for him the

film "didn't pay enough attention to the last big chapter", the Accord. For Crean, history was about transition, about placing the future in the context of the present, and this flew against the terms of the original agreement.

Over three months of protracted discussions, the ACTU seemed to have confused my role of filmmaker with that of a public relations image-maker. No one was happy with the series, least of all myself. I felt as if I had to look over my shoulder the whole time. My opinions were confirmed by the ABC who saw the film in mid 1988 just before we became involved in the discussions Crean. The ABC were interested in Parts 1 and 2, but suggested certain changes to Part 3, which they felt was too uncritical. The ABC offer lapsed through ACTU disinterest. By this time, the ABA, dissatisfied with the lack of progress, broke off their contract with the ACTU and withheld the remainder of the money to finish the film, expressing disappointment that the "documentary will not be completed in accordance with our original agreements". Film Australia then tried to wrest the copyright away from the ACTU without success. By this stage all funds to make further re-cuts had been spent, and the ACTU refused to invest any of its own funds in the film.

Efforts by Film Australia and myself to meet with the ACTU and resolve this impasse failed, and after various attempts to resolve the issue I finally decided to go to the public on the issue and screened the film illegally at the Trade Union Film Festival at the Tom Mann theatre in Melbourne and later at the Australian Film Institute in Sydney. I contravened copyright because I believed higher, more important principles were at stake—the misuse of public funds, the rights to intellectual property and the re-writing of history. Two days before the Sydney screening, the ACTU made a significant concession by announcing that it was prepared to make the film available to anyone to screen as long as a disclaimer accompanied it: "The film is not representative of the history of the union movement. It is not endorsed by the union movement and represents only Mr. Zubrycki's narrow romanticised view of our movement".

By defining copyright very rigidly in its strict legalistic terms, the ACTU completely denies the notion of intellectual copyright. Moral questions

were totally ignored and carried no weight with the ACTU. The contract stated that the ACTU alone had final control over content, and thus the ACTU can flatly deny any censorship took place. I contend, however, that the attempted suppression of the film by intending to have it recut by another party constitutes censorship on the part of the ACTU. My original idea was to make a critical appraisal of the trade union movement, not an official history. I contracted to work for Film Australia and the ACTU on this basis. Accordingly I refused to re-write history in order to produce a piece of propaganda. In a court of law elsewhere in the world, I would have strong grounds for re-dress: more than 60 countries have moral rights legislation in place, but Australian law does not recognise anything but economic rights. It is time this was changed.

The ACTU is trying to take under its wing a lot of Art and Working Life projects. It pretends to value the principle of copyright, artistic integrity and intellectual freedom. Any prestige the ACTU has managed to accrue

in the arts community must surely be undermined by this debacle. It will be an enormous tragedy if this film remains unfinished and the material ends up sitting on the shelf. It will be an even worse tragedy if somebody else re-cuts it. The enormous publicity the film has received is generating tremendous interest from unions and other organisations, and it is clear from this interest that the ACTU is not speaking for all unions. For example, the national executive of the Public Sector Union passed a motion "expressing concern...that the ACTU is being publicly perceived to be adopting censorship and standover tactics...The national executive believes that the film has merit as a brief history of the trade union movement, displaying positive images of unions and geared to a level which would have general popular appeal." As well, a number of union officials—including the federal secretary of the AJA, Chris Warren, and BWIU president Bill Ethel—sponsored the first Sydney screening of the film. A number of copies are in circulation in each state, and the ACTU recognises that it has little power to stop their circulation.

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