

# THE GOLD COAST ON SCREEN: CHILDREN'S TELEVISION SELLING BRAND AUSTRALIA IN INTERNATIONAL MARKETS

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## ABSTRACT

For many countries, children's television plays a vital role in national cultural representation. Australia with a population of 22m people has had state supports including local content quotas for children's television since the late 1970s. Despite its important role in national cultural representation Australian children's television—particularly high cost, scripted drama—has always been viewed internationally. Indeed, ever since iconic drama *Skippy* (1967), Australian children's television has relied on international investment and sales to cover its costs. Thus producers have become adept at using Australian landscapes to create a distinctive and appealing 'Brand Australia' for international audiences.

For many countries, including Australia and the UK, children's television is believed to play a vital role in national cultural representation. Children are seen as deserving of locally produced television that entertains them while reflecting familiar situations, accents and locations back to them. In order to support the production of culturally specific drama series that situate children in their own culture, Australia—with a small population of 22 million—has had state supports including tax breaks, direct subsidies and content quotas on commercial television since the late 1970s. Despite the acknowledged importance of the local, children's television in Australia—particularly high cost, scripted, drama series—relies on international investment and sales to cover the majority of its production budgets. This can impact its look, style and content, with internationally appealing, local elements foregrounded. While bush landscapes were popular in early Australian shows like *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo* (1967–1970), the majority of recent children's drama focuses on the beach, a liminal and iconic location with considerable appeal in European television markets.

In this article we examine the aesthetic and economic advantages that Australian beach locations and waterside settings offer to producers of children's live action drama series. Our examination draws on semi-structured face-to-face interviews with broadcasters and producers, and textual analysis of Australian policy documents, industry publications and live action drama series. The research presented here represents some early findings from a three-year Australian Research Council-funded project examining key global trends in the production and distribution of contemporary children's television, after a period of rapid industrial and technological change. Working with industry collaboration, the project engages with the production ecology (Steemers 2010) of children's television; that is the industrial, economic, creative and regulatory influences that shape its creation. In following the actors—the producers, broadcasters and screen agencies—to gauge their impact on the production and distribution of Australian children's television series in global markets, the research is situated in a production studies model within a political economy tradition.

Our examination of four successful children's drama series reveals the ways in which producers use identifiably Australian waterside locations in their children's television series. In doing so they manage to create live action drama that achieves local regulatory objectives, by reflecting Australian locations, stories and social norms back to Australian children, while simultaneously appealing to international broadcasters whose sales revenues are a crucial component of their production

budgets. Despite the importance of beach locations for these purposes, the beach as location is only one element of a screen production ecology that is also affected by the availability of local funding subsidies, access to production infrastructure and creative labor, currency fluctuations, and creative decision making by individual writers, directors and producers. Indeed, the complex nature of the children's TV production ecology in Australia is mirrored in the complexity of the children's drama series it engenders. These series ultimately inhabit a liminal space themselves, between the national and the international, carefully designed to appeal to their most important markets outside Australia, and simultaneously inward facing, as they seek to reflect their country of origin back to its youngest audiences. This state of creative tension is exacerbated at times by international broadcaster demands to reduce culturally specific language in order to make these series more accessible to their own audiences, when cultural specificity is the very quality needed for producers to attract local commissions and funding subsidies at home.

Four case studies: *H2o: Just Add Water* (2006–2010), *Mortified* (2006–2007), *Lockie Leonard* (2007–2010) and *Dance Academy* (2010–2013) will be used to illustrate how the connections between Australian broadcasting policy, producers' aesthetic and creative considerations and the availability of infrastructure and labor frequently result in the foregrounding of the beach and other waterside locations in Australian children's drama. These series were selected because all were produced in response to state demand, generated either by quotas on Australia's commercial networks or the 2009 introduction of the country's first free to air children's channel by public service broadcaster the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). All were set in beach or waterside locations, all received direct funding from funding agency Screen Australia and all were made with the support of the Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF), which was established in 1983 as a national children's media production and policy hub (Edgar 2006).

In addition to these common elements, the case study series were all commissioned during the mid-to late 2000s, at a time when Australia's commercial networks were prepared to invest in high quality children's drama to fill their quota obligations for 32 hours of locally made, first run children's (C) drama each year (ACMA, 2016). All were critical and commercial successes for their producers, winning national and international awards and selling well in global media markets while fulfilling the goals of national cultural representation in Australia. And yet, we argue that while spectacular beach locations

remain appealing to international buyers, and location and funding subsidies still exist, the live action drama series for which Australian children's television producers have a global reputation for excellence are under increasing threat. Their production levels have plummeted since the period examined here, due largely to commercial broadcasters' reluctance to invest in local children's content at a time of digital disruption to their business models. Animation has now largely replaced the live action drama that showcased Australian locations to both national and international audiences, meaning the beach location as signifier of Australian culture and lifestyle is far less visible in the children's drama series being produced now for national and international audiences.

## 1. AUSTRALIAN CULTURAL POLICY AND A CHILDREN'S SCREEN PRODUCTION INDUSTRY

In 1967, live action drama *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo*—filmed in bush land in the Australian state of New South Wales—revealed how extraordinarily successful Australian children's drama could become in global markets. The series, of which 91 episodes were made between 1967–69, was set in a national park where nine-year-old chief ranger's son Sonny Hammond lives with his pet kangaroo, the eponymous Skippy. The talented marsupial—she can communicate with humans, play the drums, untie knots, place bets and operate a radio—was played by up to nine different kangaroos, which were kept in hessian sacks until shooting started. Producers and cultural entrepreneurs John McCallum, a former actor, and film director Lee Robinson deliberately produced *Skippy* for export markets, filming in color with high production values, at a time when Australian television was still black and white. Their successful technique was to embed Australian settings and figures into recognized American genres, in this case US dramas such as *Flipper* (1964–1967) and *Lassie* (1954–1974) (Gibson 2014).

*Skippy* showcased Australian flora, fauna and bush settings while consistently portraying Indigenous Australians as part of that landscape, which was unusual in Australian television series of the time. The series' popularity in international markets marks the point at which Australia's 'colonial difference and displacement' became a way of asserting a national on-screen identity (Gibson 2014: 580). In *Skippy*, Australia's exoticism, remoteness and otherness became assets, with natural bush landscapes full of unusual flora and fauna ap-

pealing to international audiences. The producers' strategies for producing identifiably Australian drama series for export markets were highly successful; *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo* sold in 128 countries including England, Netherlands, Canada, Japan, and Belgium. The series was dubbed into 25 languages and viewed by more than 300 million people a week, the first time a uniquely Australian production had sold so well internationally (Moran 1985; Gibson 2014).

*Skippy's* success did not, however, immediately lead to a boom in local screen production. Indeed high-quality, children's programs remained in short supply in 1960s Australia, despite a 1957 recommendation from the Australian Broadcasting Control Board (ABCB) that regular supplies of educational, cultural and religious programs should be made available to children. Without content quotas, however, the commercial networks were able to ignore the ABCB's guidelines and use cheap US imports or inexpensive studio-based shows sponsored by biscuit and soft drink manufacturers to attract the child audience. The ABCB criticized the networks' sponsored offerings, suggesting they exploited children's leisure time and interests, but without regimes of inspection and codification could do little more (Potter 2015).

At this time however, public concern about the lack of local children's quality programs—including drama—also led to sustained campaigns by organizations such as the Australian Council for Children's Film and Television. Rising community dissatisfaction with the lack of Australian content available to audiences of all ages together with a growing enthusiasm for a local screen production industry led to an important senate enquiry, chaired by VS Vincent. The Vincent report of 1963 articulated a view that Australians were receiving an inadequate view of Australian culture, with local drama constituting only 1% of the television schedules at the time (Cunningham and Jacka 1996). It changed the debate surrounding Australian drama, including children's series, providing legitimacy for increased levels of local content and for government support for a local screen production sector (Bertrand and Collins 1981).

In response to these developments, content quotas for small amounts of Australian television for adults were gradually introduced on Australia's three commercial networks 7, 9 and 10 in the late 1960s, leading to the development of a local screen production industry. Continued public concern about the lack of local provision for children also led the ABCB to introduce low quotas for children's television—four hours every 28 days—on the commercial networks. Further, in 1977 a new regulator—the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT)—

held a public enquiry which revealed widespread public disquiet about the low budget, poor quality television on offer for Australian children. The ABT's report found the networks' commercial imperatives were not compatible with their 'acknowledged social responsibilities' and announced it would be establishing a Children's Program committee and setting content quotas for Australian programs classified "C" (for children), with drama as a high priority (Edgar 2006). The Children's Program committee produced recommendations emphasizing the importance of quality, local television that would contribute to children's social, emotional and intellectual development while supporting the goals of national cultural representation.

As a result of these recommendations, in 1979 a new policy instrument was released: The Children's Television Standards (CTS). Its purpose was to guarantee minimum levels of high quality drama for children on Australia's commercial networks. By 1984 the CTS included provision for 32 hours of locally produced children's or C first-run drama each year on networks 7, 9 and 10. The CTS stated that a children's program is one that is:

made specifically for children or groups of children; and is entertaining; and is well produced using sufficient resources to ensure a high standard of script, cast, direction, editing, shooting, sound and other production elements; and is appropriate for Australian children. (Australian Communications and Media Authority 2016)

The CTS were designed to ensure supplies of local television, particularly drama series, with high production values that could situate Australian children in their own cultural context. In other words, programs with cultural value. In their requirements for cultural specificity they ensured producers would foreground identifiably Australian locations and settings—such as the beach—in order to establish a sense of place for the child audience. The introduction of this important policy lever and particularly the C drama quotas led directly to the creation of an Australian children's television production sector and a tradition of excellence in the production of live action drama series for children. However, from the outset international sales and investment were critical to production budgets due to the size of the local television market. This meant that series were also deliberately developed to appeal to overseas markets through the use of iconic Australian locations, including the beach, thus generating both private and cultural value.

## 2. THE BEACH AND WATER-BASED NARRATIVES IN AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CONTENT

Australia has 30,000km of coastline and Australians are enthusiastic coastal dwellers, with four out of five living close to the beach. The beach is significant in constructions of Australian national identity, considered a symbol of freedom, community and innocence (Bonner et al. 2001). It is also seen as a place of leisure and, in the film *Puberty Blues*, for example, as a "playground for youthful sexual pleasure and exhibitionism" (Wadell 2003: 46). Beaches are also regarded as a natural playground, although the most well-known of Australia's beaches—Surfers Paradise on the Gold Coast south of Brisbane, and Bondi and Manly in Sydney—are actually city beaches, thus beaches are both natural and urban spaces (Fiske et al. 1987). Although the closeness of Australia's beaches to cities and urban life prevents them from being seen as tropical getaways, the existence of wild surf beaches allows a dichotomy to exist in the construction of the Australian beach as location, that is, beaches are "urban *and* natural, civilized *and* primitive, spiritual *and* physical, culture *and* nature" (Fiske et al. 1987: 55).

Differing views exist about the portrayal of the beach in Australian film and television: for some it is mythic, beautiful and abstract, yet also ordinary space (Ellison 2013). As Emma Price notes, the sense of Australian national identity created through the beach location that evokes "innocence, freedom and community" is also an exportable construction, one that can be used to promote Australia, as an "idyllic, open and pleasurable space" through art, theatre and literature as well as television (Price 2010: 452). Thus the beach has become part of Australian imagination while helping producers develop and export a beach-centered "Brand Australia", through film and television including reality television such as *Bondi Rescue* (2006–) and soap opera *Home and Away* (1988–). The latter constructs a melodramatic social reality that centers on Australian beach culture, masculinity, sun-tanned healthy bodies and wholesomeness, which has been successfully marketed to an international audience for almost 30 years (Price 2010). Australian soap operas such as *Home and Away* and *Neighbors* (1985–) represent "every day" Australian lives in suburban, beachside settings, projecting an image of youth and vitality in locations that promote community and healthy lifestyles. The formula and its scenic backdrop sell well to audiences whose lifestyles are vastly different, such as those in the UK, with both using clichéd imagery to portray Australia

as forever summer (Waddell 2003). It has been suggested that the attraction of both productions for UK audiences was “the depiction of classless, upwardly mobile society; of ordinary people with a high standard of living; of an attractive climate; and of a supportive and close community” (Monaghan 1994 in Cunningham and Jacka 1996: 118).

Clearly the beach as location has particular meanings for the majority of Australians, for whom Australia's coastline is an accessible and desirable home and its beaches a familiar place of leisure. The beach also has another set of meanings for television audiences in global markets, as noted above, for whom it suggests a particular construction of Australia with which many Australians might not be familiar. For example, Australia is a multi-cultural society yet *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* have been repeatedly criticized by commentators for their lack of ethnic and cultural diversity (Knox 2012; Ford 2015).

Whether or not it accurately reflects Australia, its stories and people, Australian screen content has certainly been effective in selling Australia generally as a tourism destination. A 20.5% increase in US visitors to Australia was recorded from 1981 to 1988, after the 1986 release of *Crocodile Dundee* for example, while in 2008, Tourism Australia deliberately ran a campaign around the release of Baz Luhrmann's movie *Australia* (Hudson and Ritchie 2006; Deloitte Access Economics 2016). Thus, as the 2012 BFI study of the UK film industry observes:

the role that films play in promoting a country or a regional rather than a specific location is also important. Films not only generate interest in a country but also act to remind people about what the country has to offer—for example by showcasing scenery and the cultural offer (BFI report 2012: 66).

Further, recent research commissioned by Screen Australia estimates 144,000 international tourism visits annually can be associated with Australian films and TV, generating approximately \$704 million in tourism expenditure each year (in comparison, total visitor spending in Australia was \$107 billion in 2014–2015). International tourists are also estimated to have stayed an average of 1.7 extra nights, for the purpose of seeing Australian film and television locations, with an approximate annual value of \$21 million. Tourism expenditure in Australia generated by film and television is therefore approximately \$725 million a year, compared to the total value of export earnings for Australian film and TV screen content, which was \$252 million in 2014–15 (Deloitte Access Economics 2016: 28).

Despite clear evidence of tourism revenues generated by Australian film and television locations, the value of the state-subsidised children's drama series discussed here is primarily considered to be cultural, with its production mandated by Australian media policy instrument the CTS. In 2011, 79% of Australians agreed that Australian film and TV stories make a vital contribution to the creation of Australian national identity (Screen Australia 2011) while 76% of Australian parents think it is important that their children watch local film and television content. They think this partly because Australian content is educational (61%) but also because of the contribution such content makes to children's cultural identity (Screen Australia 2011). Nonetheless, without state subsidies including direct funding and tax breaks, and international sales, the Australian children's screen production industry is entirely unsustainable; this tension between the national and the global plays out in the spaces of production, as the following case studies demonstrate.

### 3. CASE STUDIES

Australia's screen production companies are concentrated in the large cities of Melbourne and Sydney; nonetheless, the case studies we focus on here were shot in dispersed coastal locations in Australia, including Western Australia and Queensland. Queensland—which is twice the size of Texas, with a large rural population and small manufacturing sector—attracts productions partly because of the locations it offers, but also because of the Queensland government's sustained efforts to attract the screen production sector to the state by providing tax breaks and direct subsidies. These encouraged the 1988 establishment of the Warner Roadshow Studios, a partnership between Warner Brothers and Australia's Village Roadshow, which encompassed the associated Movie World theme park on the Gold Coast. The Studios succeeded in attracting some big budget international feature films but also drew US mini-series and telemovies to its “film friendly” location. In the late 1990s, Australian companies began to use it, as US demand declined amid a strengthening Australian dollar (Goldsmith et al. 2010).

#### 3.1 *H2O: just add water* (2006–2010)

Founded in 1988, Jonathan M. Schiff Productions (JMSP) has established a reputation for high quality children's programs that have been critically and commercially well re-



ceived worldwide. From the outset, the natural beauty of the Australian landscape has been a significant component of his brand. Shiff's first children's drama, *Ocean Girl* (1994–1997) was a science fiction story set on Queensland's Great Barrier Reef and in the Daintree Rainforest. These exotic and eye-catching landscapes, and the series' powerful ecological message, were a great success for JMSP, grossing \$50 million in export sales (Ward and Potter 2009). Their popularity caught the attention of German domestic broadcaster and international distributor, ZDF, which subsequently offered JMSP an output deal. The ongoing financing and creative relationship between Shiff, ZDF and Shiff's longstanding Australian broadcast partner, Network Ten, has proved to be hugely significant for JMSP. Almost twenty years of collaboration has spawned a number of popular, girl-skewed franchises including *The Elephant Princess* (2008–), *Lightning Point* (2012–) and—with most commercial success—*H2o: Just Add Water* (2006–), which has been seen by more than 300 million children worldwide. Without exception, these series were commissioned by Network 10 to fill the network's C drama quotas, and would not have been made for Australian television otherwise. And yet most of their financing comes from their success outside Australia, with Shiff explaining in 2008: “You're either driven as a local business (and paying the negative costs) or operating as a global business with 12% from the local partner but the rest is international”.

*H2o: Just add water* is a live action children's fantasy series aimed at the tween market. After swimming in a hidden grotto, underneath the full moon, three teenage girls are transformed into mermaids every time they come into contact with water, a secret they have to conspire to hide from parents, friends and potential threats. The concept was instantly appealing to young girls, with its universal themes of fantasy, friendships and a secret “other” life. In creating a series based in a natural, marine world, Shiff was able to use beach and waterside settings that appeared aspirational and attractive to European audiences, reminiscent of warm holidays and endless tropical summers, but would have been impossibly difficult and costly for a European producer to achieve (Ward and Potter 2009). Indeed, Shiff sees that natural, sunny, water-based aesthetic as very much part of his visual signature, which has been described as “almost a fetishisation of what many non-Australian audiences perceive as appealingly exotic landscapes and lifestyles saturated with colour in contrast to the familiar, more subdued landscapes of home” (Ward and O'Regan 2011: 44).

Like much of JMSP's slate, *H2o* was filmed on Queensland's Gold Coast—a popular tourist destination with both Australians

and international visitors. The show incorporated all the state's spectacular subtropical environments of the beach, the reef and the rainforest as well as utilizing its glamorous urbanization, complete with marinas, cafes and esplanades. Shiff suggests that the main driver of *H2o*'s international appeal is this aspirational, upmarket lifestyle, and that his German investor and distributor ZDF Enterprise's investment and influence played a significant role in the style and look of the series. As he explains:

Our German partners often say “keep away from the high rises”. I go—well that's the QI building and they say “well it looks like a Russian housing commission block of flats”. (Shiff 2008)

The program also intentionally utilizes the colorful features of the Gold Coast's sea, sky and beaches. As director Colin Budds explains:

I stayed away from pastels and beige and went for the primary colours and given that our biggest audience is in landlocked Europe, they love to see the crashing surf, blue skies and palm trees...I wanted to keep it energised, and I didn't want a lot of “suburban” or middle of the range lenses. It was “see the real sunny Gold Coast”...i.e. wide and tight without the middle ground. (in Corday 2007: 152–3)

The use of the Gold Coast as a location is also significant because of the availability of film production resources, specifically the custom-built studios at Village Roadshow that include three water tanks, including the largest water tank facility in Australia. These studios have been used for other water based narratives including the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, *Nim's Island* (2008) and the third Narnia film, *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (2010); their presence supports a local infrastructure of skilled technicians and crew.

In addition to the underwater filming facilities at Village Roadshow, Shiff used a local tourist attraction, Sea World Marine Park, with its tropical aquarium and trained dolphins. He managed to incorporate Sea World into the narrative of the show while also utilizing the practical resources it offered. Unlike *Ocean Girl*, where the underwater shots were filmed in open sea, many of *H2o*'s sophisticated underwater sequences were filmed at Sea World in a more easily controlled aquatic environment.

Shiff has long recognized that the beachside aesthetic is a vital part of his brand, something that marks him out from

some of his European competitors. He has cleverly packaged the tourist dream of Australian landscape, climate and lifestyle into a highly commercial brand of children's television. Shiff acknowledges however that while Australian audiences may engage with the location of *H2O: Just Add Water* as the Gold Coast (though the locality is never mentioned by name), half of the US audience probably think it is filmed in Florida. Hence the Gold Coast as production location functions as a non-specific, sunny, safe, charismatic place that resonates in different ways for Australians, US or European audiences. Its meaning is determined by its audience's own cultural backgrounds (Olsen 2004), which lends Shiff's series their liminal quality. However, despite their use of location to create their international appeal, his series are commissioned and funded on the grounds of their Australian cultural value.

### 3.2 *Mortified* (2006–2007)

Live action comedy *Mortified* was produced by the ACFT in partnership with Enjoy Entertainment. Set in the mythical town of Sunburn Beach, *Mortified* was filmed on Queensland's Gold Coast and premiered on Network Nine in 2006, running for 26 episodes as part of the network's C drama quota obligations. As with all local drama series, international pre-sales were integral to its funding, with the ACTF securing pre-sales from the UK's BBC, and Disney Channels in Australia and Asia. Since its launch, *Mortified* has had great international success, screening in 180 countries including Germany, France, the US and Canada. It still plays in Australia on public service children's channel ABCME. The series was also a critical success, winning the 2006 Australian Film Institute (AFI) Award for best children's drama and an International Emmy nomination in 2007, as well as being shortlisted for the prestigious Prix Jeunesse in 2008.

*Mortified* centers on Taylor Fry, an eleven-year-old girl with an over-active imagination, who dreams of escaping the embarrassing antics of her mortifying parents. Unlike other Australian children's dramas such as *H2O*, the very concept of which is rooted in marine life, tropical islands and the glamorized beach landscape in which it is filmed, *Mortified* is a realistic story about everyday families. It is set in a fictional but nonetheless quintessentially Australian beachside suburb, with the majority of the action taking place in Taylor's school, local community and family home. The lifestyle portrayed in *Mortified* is typical of the urbanized coast in Australia, where the beach forms an integral part of children's lives. Taylor and her friends walk to school via the beach, socialize there

and spend their leisure time swimming and surfing. They are portrayed as completely at ease in the ocean and outdoor environment, where the distant cityscape forms a grey backdrop against the blue water and skies, and golden sand.

The producers knew that a beach aesthetic was an advantage for an Australian children's series, as it would deliver cultural value while appealing to international buyers. Writer and series creator Angela Webber was based near Sydney's beaches in New South Wales and so was keen to locate the show close to home. However, the offer of production investment from Queensland state funding body the Pacific Film and Television Commission (now Screen Queensland) meant that the series was ultimately shot on location in Queensland. While ACTF producer Bernadette O'Mahony acknowledges that state agency finance was a big reason for re-locating the series, it was by no means the only benefit of Queensland, which also allowed access to affordable waterside housing. As she explains:

*Mortified* was originally set in a beachside suburb in Sydney. If we'd left it there we probably wouldn't have had the location of the family's house right on the water like we did on the Gold Coast. (O'Mahony 2016)

Aware of the appeal of the beach location to landlocked European audiences, the production team capitalized on the Gold Coast setting, utilizing the beach and ocean backdrop wherever they could:

When we moved the series to Queensland for financing reasons, we wanted to make the most of the location and the location brief was to find an average house, preferably near or with a view of the beach. Once we found that, we wanted to make the most of the balcony and view across the yard, so we used the exterior as well, and wrote more scenes in the front yard, on the deck rather than inside. (O'Mahony 2016)

This location choice for Taylor's family home had a large window with ocean views. The set designer also added a deck to the house, which looks out over the sea. The coast provided a stunning backdrop for both interior and exterior scenes, and thus the beach is unobtrusive, almost incidental and yet omnipresent. Each time the audience sees Taylor and her friends in "walk and talk" scenes on their way home from

school, they amble along the seaside boardwalk. Occasional aerial shots emphasize the scale of the beach and coastline and the proximity of Taylor's home and suburb to the ocean. According to O'Mahony (2016):

We always intended to have the walking and talking scenes to and from school along the beach or waterways to showcase the setting, but the house being literally opposite the sand was a bonus.

Despite the fact that the show was shot in very close proximity to Gold Coast locations used by Jonathan Shiff in *H2o*, *Mortified* has a very different aesthetic. It is less glossy and more rooted in everyday Australian life. Where the cinematography of *H2o* emphasizes the luxurious shine of the turquoise water and the sparkling marina, *Mortified*'s look is less exotic, almost nostalgic. The children in faded school uniforms, with sandy school shoes, are seen walking along dusty boardwalks, representing a more realistic and conventional slice of Australian life.

Director Pino Amenta was also careful to maintain a contrast between the striking colors of the natural outdoor settings and the costumes, so that the viewers would not be overwhelmed and miss the show's emotional nuances. The characters' clothes were therefore deliberately chosen for their subdued tones, so they would contrast with the bright yellow of the beach and the bright blue of the sky. Amenta also agrees that the series' location provided an important tonal quality, stating:

I don't think it would have worked as well in a big city. It feels like we're in a small town and with the high rises of Surfers Paradise in the distance, it almost has a yellow brick road kind of feel. The kids in the series are near a city but not part of it. And visually it is vast and open. (in ACTF n.d.)

The naturalistic portrayal of the Australian beach setting still proved appealing and aspirational to international audiences, even without the artifice and glamour of *H2o*. But the appeal for domestic Australian audiences and the creation of a sense of the local were just as important to the producers:

The location wasn't chosen specifically with the international market in mind, but it certainly gave it international appeal. That ideal of living right on the sand is aspirational in Australia as well, and

worked both domestically and internationally. It was always written as the parents being old surfers and hippies so the beach was always going to play a part wherever we shot it. That aspirational location and lifestyle became another character in the series, and wherever possible we made sure the series had that sense of place. (O'Mahony 2016)

Not only did the Gold Coast location provide important state subsidies, according to O'Mahony (2016) the availability of highly skilled creative labor, due to the proximity of Village Roadshow studios and the infrastructure associated with the facility, was an additional benefit. Thus it was a combination of financial incentives, accessible beachside settings and access to infrastructure and creative labor that cumulatively led to the decision to locate *Mortified* on Queensland's Gold Coast. Nonetheless, since *Mortified* was made, state government screen production subsidies have been reduced, which combined with a smaller labor supply has reduced the gold Coast's competitiveness as a location. According to O'Mahony:

Queensland's not as busy as it used to be. It had a good run with kids TV, with Jonathan (Shiff). But they don't have a lot of money at Screen Queensland now. From a casting point of view when we did *Mortified up there*, we did bring quite a few cast from interstate. The pool of people isn't as big cast-wise, and it does cost you to bring people up. The further you get from Melbourne and Sydney the more you will be importing people and there's a cost to that. (2013)

### 3.3 *Lockie Leonard* (2007–2010)

Live action drama *Lockie Leonard* was adapted from the books by Australian author Tim Winton. The first series was commissioned in 2007, also by Network Nine, and was produced by Goalpost Pictures. The series was distributed internationally by the ACTF, and while series one secured a small international pre-sale from pay TV operator Jetix, series two was picked up by CBBC in the UK. As well as winning a 2008 Logie and a 2007 AFI award, the show was also nominated for a BAFTA for Best International Children's Drama Series in 2007. Both the first and second series have been internationally successful, selling in more than 170 countries.



The original books are set in a small surfing community called Angelus which is a fictionalized version of the Western Australian town of Albany, where Tim Winton spent some of his childhood. The hero, Lockie, is a surfing fan who moves to Angelus with his family and has to start at a new high school in the solitary coastal settlement. Life seems pretty bleak for Lockie, until he realizes that Angelus has some of the best surf in the world.

Tim Winton is one of Australia's most celebrated contemporary novelists and is widely recognized for his depiction of contemporary Australian culture, his deep-seated affection for his homeland, and his passion for the ocean and surfing. Many of his stories are set in his home state of Western Australia (WA) and utilize its typically beautiful, remote and, at times, dangerous landscape. This wild and spectacular scenery is rarely seen in television drama, but the show's producer, Kylie du Fresne, felt that it was important to stay true to the specific setting of Winton's original book:

With *Lockie Leonard*, we didn't have a lot of resources. But we felt it's Tim Winton, his landscape and the feel and the look of his landscape. He's such a visceral writer; we have to create a series that captures that, as well as the drama. (2013)

Despite *Mortified*'s sunny beach aesthetic, the high rises of the urbanized Gold Coast can nonetheless be glimpsed in the background. But Angelus presented a very different vision of the iconic Australian beach location. While Lockie and his family live among a starkly isolated yet close-knit community, these beaches are untamed surf beaches, away from the urban sprawl of the Gold Coast. The remote locations echo the series' themes of transition, marginalization and displacement, as Lockie attempts to settle into his new life just as he enters puberty. While the series speaks directly to Australian children, its international investors did worry it was too Australian. As du Fresne explains:

We had that international voice of people that we trusted saying "we love it because it's unique but don't make it so Australian because it's not accessible". So we did have a little bit of that pressure, they had script approval and other normal approvals. (du Fresne 2013)

The evocative settings also complement the series' acutely observed emotional narrative, which fearlessly tackles

themes that might normally be considered too confronting for children's television (Potter 2015). Stories such as Lockie's puberty and wet dreams, his brother's bed wetting, his best friend's family breakdown and his mother's fragile mental health are all dealt with in an honest, uncompromising style, which reflects the stripped back rawness of the undeveloped landscape. The family home is shabby and rundown, its interior dated and a little gloomy. The house is always threatening to slide into the swamp, its temporary nature a stark contrast with the power of the ocean and the pounding surf, where Lockie spends so much of his time.

In addition to stunning locations, Western Australia also offers production companies like Goalpost Pictures considerable financial support from its screen funding and development agency, Screen West. Screen West remains committed to encouraging screen production in the state and will offer comparatively significant financial incentives to companies that will film there, particularly projects that are deemed to be Western Australian stories. Despite the combination of beautiful, under-used locations and healthy financial support from the local state agency, Western Australia is rarely used as a location and Lockie is a notable exception in recent years.

A number of factors contribute to its lack of popularity as a production location. Unlike Queensland, where the presence of the Village Roadshow studios on the Gold Coast has attracted a stream of big budget Hollywood films and local TV productions and thus created an infrastructure, Western Australia does not have the same framework in terms of skilled labor and facilities. In practice, this means that many key crew members have to be shipped in from interstate, which can have a significant impact on a program's budget, as du Fresne discovered:

We shot on location in Albany, which is where the books were set. So there was a huge strain on resources, having to accommodate an entire cast and crew in a remote location. And when you film in the west you have to import a lot of stuff from the east. So we were under huge budget pressure. (du Fresne 2013)

Since *Lockie* was filmed in Albany in 2007, Screen West have enforced conditions for accessing their financial support: all production companies from outside of the state have to be in a genuine official treaty or co-production agreement with a credited Western Australian producer if they wish to apply for significant production finance. While the policy is

designed to ensure that WA production companies directly benefit economically, in practice, satisfying the conditions can prove onerous. With any co-production, there is the challenge of aligning with a partner with similar creative tastes but in WA, where there are limited production partners to pair with, the difficulties are increased. There are the additional complications of co-developing projects with partners that are on opposite sides of the country. As a result, *Lockie Leonard* is one of only a handful of internationally successful children's dramas to be produced in Western Australia and one of the last TV drama productions before Screen West's change in policy. The state's geographical remoteness, the necessity of partnering with a local production company to qualify for significant local financial support and the cost of transporting and accommodating key crew from outside the state can outweigh the generous economic benefits offered by the state agency.

### 3.4 *Dance Academy* (2010–2013)

*Dance Academy* is a live action drama series aimed at 10–14 year olds that ran for three seasons (2010–2013) on the Australian public service broadcaster ABCME. This dedicated children's channel was launched in 2009 and *Dance Academy* quickly became one of its most popular series. The show was produced by Melbourne-based production company, Werner Films, with the mentorship and support of the ACTF. *Dance Academy* was filmed entirely in studios and on location in Sydney and was set in the world of a fictional ballet school, the National Academy of Dance. Country girl Tara arrives in the big city to pursue her dream of becoming a principal ballerina, and the three series track her rites of passage through the school: her friendships, romances and competitive rivalries.

When she set up the company in 2008, producer Joanna Werner had already enjoyed a fruitful relationship with the German public service broadcaster ZDF, a result of the seven years she had worked as a producer with Jonathan Shiff at JMSP. ZDF's commercially successful relationship with JMSP had demonstrated to them that there was both a German domestic, and wider international appetite, for high end, Australian-produced children's live action drama series with a culturally specific setting. With a license fee from the ABC and additional finance from Screen Australia and state agencies, ZDF came on board as a pre-sale with ZDF's international distribution company, ZDF Enterprises, taking rest of world rights on the series.

Werner's creative partnership with the German broadcaster proved to be influential because although the company was based in Werner's home town, Melbourne, ZDF were keen to utilize a different, aspirational Australian landscape, the waterside city of Sydney with its iconic Opera House. They asked for production to be moved, as Werner explains:

ZDF said they'd come on board if it was shot in Sydney. And I decided to really embrace that. And we didn't really feel that any shows had thoroughly embraced Sydney and used Sydney as a character. New York is so celebrated in shows like *Gossip Girl* and *Sex and the City*. We decided to take that approach and have the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House in shot as much as possible. We centered the show in the most picturesque parts of Sydney. We didn't just do it for the international market. I think Australian audiences want to see that too. (Werner 2013)

The ability to shoot in these iconic locations was due to the practical and financial support of the local state agency, Screen New South Wales, which had recently reduced location fees for screen producers in an attempt to increase the use of locations such as the Opera House and Sydney Harbour.

When compared to younger 8–12-year-old audience-targeted shows such as *Mortified* and *H2o*, *Dance Academy* is an older-skewing brand, hence Werner's comparison with a sophisticated, urban teen title like *Gossip Girl*. Younger audiences might find the laidback Australian beachside aesthetic appealing, but as those audiences mature, an edgier, fashionable, metropolitan yet still quintessentially Australian landscape proves popular with the teenage market.

As well as being perceived as a cool destination for young Australians, Sydney is often the city that teenage Europeans dream of visiting on gap years and backpacking holidays, and has always been associated with the color blue in its marketing and branding materials (Gammack and Donald 2006). *Dance Academy* fueled this fantasy with its central cast of teens, staying in boarding houses far from parental control, having romantic interactions under blue skies on a hillside above the crystal waters of Sydney Harbor, with ferries chugging through the background. Werner was also fortunate that Sydney was in a quiet production phase, so she had access to a large pool of creative labor. As she explains:

We got the best people. Our head of makeup was Academy Award nominated. Our Director of Photography was Martin McGrath who is an icon and shot so many wonderful features and series. I didn't have established relationships because I hadn't worked in Sydney before but because Series One was such a collaborative success and everyone enjoyed it, the majority of crew stayed for all three series. (Werner 2013)

The spectacular settings, which play directly into a teenage fantasy of what life in glamorous Sydney would be like, combined with the high end production values and the beautifully choreographed dance sequences meant *Dance Academy* was a huge critical and commercial success, both domestically and overseas. The show is currently screening in over 160 countries including Nickelodeon in the UK, Teen Nick in the US and ZDF in Germany. It has won multiple honors including two Australian Logies and was twice nominated for an International Emmy award. A theatrical movie, shot on location in Sydney and New York, was released in April 2017.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

These case studies reveal how Australia's landscapes, beach and waterside settings, and sunny climate offer significant natural assets for screen producers charged with achieving the goals of national cultural representation while creating sustainable funding models for their children's drama series. By speaking to leading producers of children's television about their work, we have been able to see how the various elements that make up the screen production ecology intersect and interact in the screen production industry. The aesthetic advantages offered by Australian waterside locations are clearly not enough, on their own, to sustain the work of children's television producers. More pragmatic considerations including the availability of state financial support also clearly influences the ways in which producers use waterside locations, as does the accessibility of production infrastructure and local supplies of skilled creative labor.

It is important to note that three of the four case studies analyzed here were commissioned by Australia's commercial networks in order to fulfill their annual quota obligations for C drama series. This means that their primary value is intended to be cultural, through the contribution they make to the goals of Australian national cultural representation.

Nonetheless their popularity with European audiences may well contribute to tourism revenues, as part of a broader body of Australian screen content, while these sales also provide vital funding for producers.

Unfortunately, since the late 2000s, Australia's commercial networks (which exert considerable influence in the production ecology) have radically scaled back their live action drama commissions, choosing instead to fill their quotas with less expensive animations. These are frequently co-produced with international partners and are often not even based on Australian stories and will neither look nor sound Australian. Unfortunately, without a local broadcaster attached to their live action drama children's series, Australian producers are unable to access any local funding subsidies, rendering their liminal, iconic series financially unviable. The children's television industry in Australia has contracted sharply as a result. Australian locations, and Australian beaches, have therefore become much less visible in local and international children's television markets since the late 2000s. Thus soap operas like *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* have become increasingly important markers of Australian culture for non-Australian audiences, despite their much criticized lack of diversity.

The future of children's live action drama series like our case studies is now far from secure, despite the very considerable critical and commercial success they have enjoyed in international television markets and the cultural value they deliver to Australian children. Of course, Australia is not alone in facing challenges in ensuring supply of quality children's television drama that situates children in their own cultural context. It provides, however, a useful lesson in the need for media policy to adapt quickly to digital regimes, and in the challenges facing independent screen producers as they struggle to compete in fiercely competitive, global media markets.

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