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Is Australia ready for colour TV?

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This year's Logies were a celebration of diversity on our screens. But there's still a long way to go, writes Karl Quinn.

If you were judging the state of Australian television by last Sunday's Logies, you might reasonably conclude that when it comes to onscreen diversity - of the ethnic variety, at least - we're not doing too badly.

The biggest award of the night, the Gold, went to Waleed Aly, a brown-skinned Muslim of Egyptian heritage who also picked up a Silver as best presenter. Among those Aly pipped at the post was SBS newsreader Lee Lin Chin (Indonesian-born, Chinese heritage). But what you might not have registered is that the love was spread far wider than that. Adam Dovile (Italian heritage) won best new talent. The top acting awards went to Alex Dimitriades (Greek heritage) and Deborah Mailman (Indigenous Australian). He won for *The Principal*, a show about racial tensions and crime in a school in Sydney's inner west, she won for an episode of Indigenous drama *Redfern Now*.

The most outstanding miniseries went to *The Secret River*, and *Ready For This* was most outstanding children's series: both tell Indigenous stories.

Oh, and there was Miguel Maestre, the bouncy Spanish chef who took to the stage with his *Living Room* co-hosts to accept the Best Lifestyle Program award and to give a thank-you speech that had the three Anglos speaking Spanish and Maestre speaking Strine.

It looked a lot like a warm-hearted celebration of a multiculturalism that had finally become mainstream, until Aly drew attention to the elephant in the room: the subtle, and not so subtle, racism of network television in Australia.

He spoke about an actor who dared not use his real name because he feared he would miss out on roles if he did. Australia was simply not ready to embrace an actor called Mustafa. By Monday, Mustafa had been outed as Tyler De Nawi, a young actor of Lebanese background whose CV includes significant roles in *The Principal* and *Here Come the Habibs*. So that's a plus, right? But, he said this week, his trouble is not so much with landing the parts as it is with getting the auditions that lead to them.

"I can count the auditions I've had for professional jobs on two hands," says the 27-year-old, who has been acting for three years. "My Anglo actor friends, they'd get about three or four auditions a week. There have been stages when I don't get one for three or four months."

Last year he landed three jobs out of five auditions - "so my strike rate is pretty good" - but it's a struggle to survive. "I don't want to be given a role unless I deserve it," he says. But equally, he doesn't want to miss out on a role he deserves simply because of his ethnicity.

A look at the on-air talent lists of the free-to-air networks shows that whatever hurdle an ethnic name might pose in the world of drama, it is nothing compared to the rest of the slate. There are some Italian names among the rosters of the commercial networks, a few Greek and a very small smattering of Asian (Sam Pang and Anh Do on Ten, news reporters Neary Ty and Tracy Vo on Nine), even a Maori or two (Cian Elyse White from Seven's 800 Words, Jay Laga'ia on kids' TV). But for the most part it's a wall of white.

The ABC fares better, thanks largely to the upturn in the past few years in its Indigenous slate. The forthcoming drama *Cleverman*, the sketch series *Black Comedy*, the dramas *Secret River*, *Redfern Now* and *Ready For This* all feature Indigenous characters and storylines, and in many instances were made by Indigenous filmmakers too. It also has the multi-ethnic cast of *Tomorrow When the War Began* and Ronny Chieng (Malaysian heritage) and a *Play School* that continues to be perhaps the most colour-blind corner of Australian TV.

SBS of course has the most ethnically diverse line-up across the board. Representing a culturally and ethnically diverse Australia is in its very DNA, but with an audience share of around 6 per cent, its offerings sit at the fringe for most viewers.

Screen Australia is conducting a major survey of diversity in Australian TV drama. The research will cover not just ethnicity but the broader issue of representation in relation to gender, sexuality and disability. The sample will take in 200 programs over five years and, according to research manager Rebecca Mostyn, will provide a benchmark against which the industry can be measured in the future.

The report isn't likely to be tabled until August. "It's early stages," says Mostyn, "but we have the sense that in the area of 'mundane' or everyday representations of diversity things are improving. That said, it's likely that some pockets of diversity are still likely to be under-represented."

The Screen Australia survey will be the most comprehensive, but it won't be the first such study. Back in 2002, Queensland academic Harvey May produced *Broadcast in Colour* for the Australian Film Commission (a precursor of Screen Australia). May found even then that "mundane multiculturalism" - representations of diversity as a simple fact, not an issue - were on the rise.

Using a relatively small sample (65 actors) and a two-week sample of Australian TV drama in 1999, May established that actors born overseas and from a non-English-speaking background landed 3 per cent of roles (against 14 per cent representation in the general population), actors born here but with one or both parents born overseas and from a non-English-speaking background landed 17 per cent of roles (11 per cent in the general population), and Indigenous actors landed 3 per cent of roles (2 per cent in the general population).

It would be fair to assume things have improved - especially for Indigenous performers. But on the other fronts it might not all be good news, says actor Chum Ehelepola.

A New Zealand-born, Australian-raised, LA-based 40-year-old of Sri Lankan background, Ehelepola says he has worked on every network in Australia, sometimes in roles where his background is a storyline, sometimes not. "I did *The Straits*, playing a Sri Lankan refugee, put on an accent, it was a great character arc," he says. "But if I have to put an accent on just because I look like this, I turn those shows down."

In LA, he has been feted for his ethnicity. "There's huge competition between networks to find the top ethnic actors of the year," he says. "It's not about being philanthropic, it's about booking talent that can sell product at home and internationally."

Ehelepola thinks things in this country are starting to get better after a spell when they probably became worse. "I kind of feel like in some weird way we were more progressive back when we had shows like *Acropolis Now*," he says. "They were sort of stereotypes but they were funny and they did some good stuff. Back then you could just say shit and everyone knew the tone of it, you could laugh with it, not at it."

The rise of political correctness has made life worse for ethnic actors.

"You can get too sensitive on ethnicity," he says. "Suddenly you can't talk about it because everyone's going to call you a racist, but if you don't talk about it everyone says you're whitewashing. So you can't win either way as an ethnic actor."

Ehelepola, who is now filming season two of the Stan comedy *No Activity*, thinks the success of Nine's comedy *Here Come the Habibs* may help change that. "It says yeah, we're allowed to laugh at ethnicity again," he says.

The people I spoke to for this story were united in their view that things are changing, but slowly. And for some, the pace has been glacial.

Melissa Bonne, a 31-year-old actor born in Zimbabwe, finally landed her first major role in a TV series last year - after 15 years trying. "It took me nine years to land my first audition [for a TV role]," she says. "The part in *Janet King* wasn't written as an ethnic role. That was just massive." It comes down to the writing. "It starts with the stories - people being mindful of how things have changed in society.

"If you stand and look outside your own experience you're suddenly going to get a richer version of life that will resonate with more people.

" It kind of feels like a no-brainer."