

TV moment was no joke



Miranda Tapsell and Nakkiah Lui host ABC's Get Crackin'.

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- By Stan Grant
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When Nakkiah Lui and Miranda Tapsell hijacked ABC comedy show, Get Crack!n, they exposed the little secret of Australian television, and in turn Australia in general: to be seen and heard, indigenous people need to “whiten” up. Rule one: don’t scare white people. Dial down the anger. Tone down the “blackness”. This is our Faustian pact: sell your soul and gain the world. We all know reconciliation sells better than resentment. Lui and Tapsell turned that on its head and it’s what made the final episode of Get Crack!n so incendiary.

Here were two indigenous performers lampooning a show that itself lampoons breakfast TV. It was a lampoon of a lampoon. Subversive, no doubt, but the irony surely wasn’t lost on Lui and Tapsell; they were part of the joke, two privileged indigenous women, appearing on primetime national TV to mock, well, the fact that black faces don’t appear on primetime national TV. Lui and Tapsell know the game, they’ve played the game; but now they were tearing up the rule book, launching a vulgar tirade against the media, Australia, racism, and whiteness in general. No more playing nice.

It shocked me. Not all of it appealed to me. Some of it appalled me. It wasn’t funny and it wasn’t meant to be. I knew where this came from. This was painful to watch. Everything Lui and Tapsell said was true; we live in one of the richest countries on earth and yet indigenous people die 10 years younger than other Australians, are locked up in horrifying numbers, bury far too many children who take their own lives. Of course we should be angry.

Tapsell especially, howled at the camera echoing a rage familiar to every indigenous person in Australia. Miranda Tapsell the actress vanished and here was a black woman unhinged and unadorned, all the trauma of her history, all the suffering of her family, all the struggle to be seen and heard, all of it laid bare. It has been hailed the most powerful TV moment in recent memory. But a turning point? Not yet.

A week later I watched the ABC's budget coverage. Australians tuned in to have their economic future explained and what did they see? White people. Presenters, reporters, analysts, all well qualified, but all white. In 2019, when almost half of Australians were born overseas or have a parent born overseas, would it be too difficult to find an economist of colour? Not for the sake of ticking diversity boxes but because they might have something to offer.

In one week I had seen the potential of the ABC to challenge and unsettle us and an example of how far the national broadcaster — media in general — still has to go. I work at the ABC as a global affairs analyst. It is important to me that as an indigenous person I am not put in some professional box. I don't have to report and write only about indigenous issues.

This year the ABC appointed Bridget Brennan as London correspondent, the first indigenous person at the network to be given a foreign posting. Good, but 25 years after the Seven Network sent an indigenous reporter to London, me. The ABC is changing but no one could believe it is changing quickly enough. Across its flagship news programs you are still more likely to hear a strongly accented British person than someone with a strong Asian, Middle Eastern or African voice. I worked with US broadcaster CNN for more than a decade with reporters and presenters of all colours and ethnicities. Watch any CNN political panel and you will see America — the world — in all its diversity. The situation is the same at the BBC or Al Jazeera. And they are there for what they have to say not what they are.

I don't like identity boxes. In a perfect world I would rather not speak of identity; but I must if only to be free of it. I think that's what Lui and Tapsell were saying: see us. It is beyond a joke.

Stan Grant is a writer and journalist.