

GETTING TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Andrew Knight

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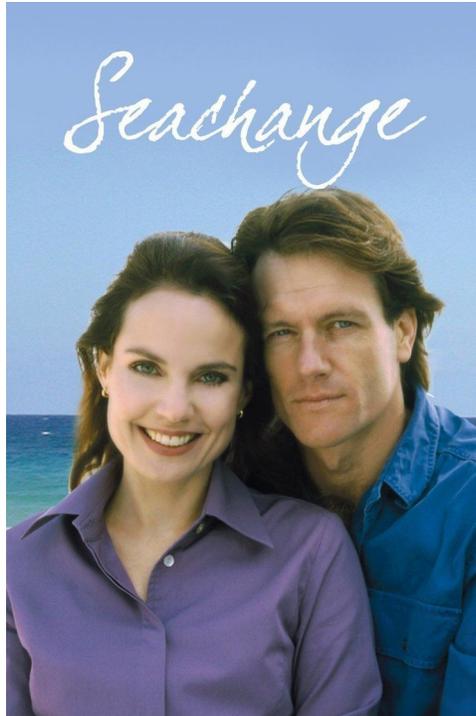
In his own words, Andrew Knight has created “some of Australia’s highest rating television series and some of its worst.” Together with Deb Cox he wrote the acclaimed series *Seachange* and *After The Deluge*. Prior to this Andrew “held the pen” in rooms full of very talented comic actors on shows such as *Fast Forward*, *The D Generation*, and *Full Frontal*. Other credits include *Spotswood*, *Kangaroo Palace* and *The Fast Lane* (co-written with John Clarke. His most recent work with Deb Cox is *CrashBurn*, a 13 part series commissioned by Sue Masters for Network Ten.

(Interview conducted at the Byron Writers Festival, Sunday 3 August 2003)

Paul Davies: You spoke yesterday on the session about ‘Character’ (at the Byron Writers’ Festival 2003) about one of the problems of Australian television drama being the shoe-horning of characters into formulas and structures that are already developed and one of the great revolutions of *Seachange* is that it breaks away from that.

Andrew Knight: Even more so in the new series *Crash Burn*. It’s largely a necessity.

Paul Davies: Yes. Because even with something like *Seachange* a major set is the magistrate’s court and there’s two cops and a pub...and some episodes hang on the idea of a crime or misdemeanour. So it’s still the story of a magistrate.



Sigrid Thornton and William McInnes
Seachange (1998 – 2000)

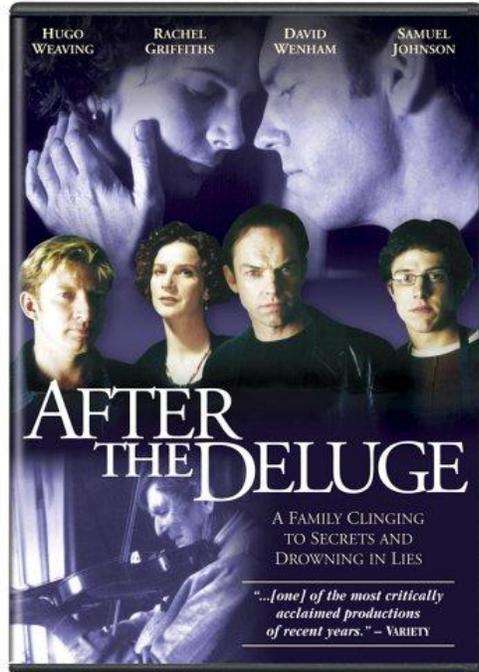
Andrew Knight: Deb (Cox) never wanted to make it a magistrate that was my idea. But to me there are so many different restrictions when you do a television series and there's this necessity that you do have a limited number of sets and limited number of locations. There are a whole lot of parameters and you do need to confine story. What we tried to do with the magistrate thing was turn it on its head and never use it at the center of the story. And we'd try to make it allude to the philosophical point we were trying to make in every episode. So occasionally it worked and occasionally it didn't. But when you've got a very long series with many writers it causes stasis. You have to do it as a McDonalds. You have to say this character does this. Otherwise a writer will go away and do it in any way that feels comfortable. And a lot of the job of script editors on series is to bring them into line. The great joy of writing with Deb is we are our own editors and so we can make our characters shift.

Paul Davies: An unheard of freedom.

Andrew Knight: It is but it will catch up with us if we have too many failures...

Paul Davies: No danger of that yet.

Andrew Knight: Oh I don't know...*After the Deluge* didn't rate. It got great reviews.



David Wenham, Rachel Griffiths, Hugo Weaving, Samuel Johnson
After the Deluge (2003)

Paul Davies: Was that because it was on Channel 10 ?

Andrew Knight: I think it was hard for the standard Cox/Knight audience to locate us there.

Paul Davies: And equally so for the Channel 10 audience...

Andrew Knight: Yeah I think they had trouble finding how you connect with an audience that isn't *Big Brother*. I admire 10 for trying.

Paul Davies: Is that Sue Masters?

Andrew Knight: Yes. Originally we were going to do it at the ABC but it was in the Shier era. And it was a bit of a nightmare. And given that the ABC is on such a tight budget it would have been almost impossible to finance. We might have got there but we would never have got that cast. That cast was an extra million dollars on top of the whole production. So there was a thrill to have the appropriate amount of money to make it for a change. I'm not having a go at the ABC I just wish they could get more money.

Paul Davies: But also mini series seem to go in and out of fashion all the time. Writer's love them because you can have that expression.

Andrew Knight: They're kind of easier. The thing about them too is, unlike film, you've got a chance to follow multiple strands. In fact you have to have a kind of Victorian structure to it (like a Dickens novel).

Paul Davies: Which were serialized in magazines anyway.

Andrew Knight: Yes. You have a bit here and a bit there. Series has got that but because of the implicit production problems you always feel caged. We had real troubles with *Crash Burn*. We'd say we want a traveling shot - no you can't have a traveling shot - okay, so we say we'll do it on a phone...yes okay do it on a phone, but not in that set...So series are very frustrating things to do in this country. It's not anyone's fault. It's just that the budgets are so friggling tight.

Paul Davies: On a *Blue Heelers* once we had to get the TAC to sponsor a car crash, so long as we gave them a story about old people giving up their licences.

Andrew Knight: You can see why product placement would be so attractive.

Paul Davies: Perhaps it could fund the shortfalls.

Andrew Knight: Something has to. Something has to give. We just can't afford to fund drama at the current level. On series production there's not much leeway, you've usually given away most of your back end just to make the production in the first place. Your fees aren't all that enormously high. And might have to sustain you across a four year period.

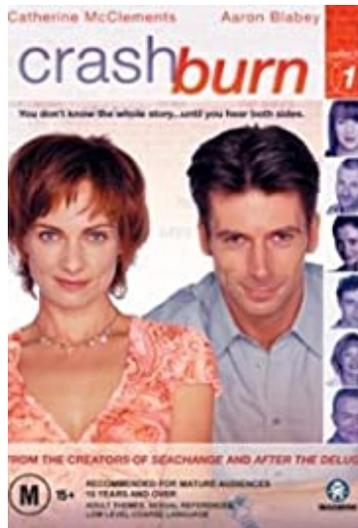
Paul Davies: Unless there's the overseas sale...

Andrew Knight: But even then very little will come back because usually you've relinquished those rights just to get it financed in the first place. Either there's been a distribution guarantee or you've pre-sold your biggest market just to get there. Like if you've pre-sold England, you're getting cable and distribution and if they're taking 35% out of it, there ain't nothing coming back. My money comes from making high turn over television.

Paul Davies: So you started with comedy, *Fast Forward*, *D Gen*, *Full Frontal* period. You say you wrote jokes because it pulled chicks. (laughter)

Andrew Knight: It didn't actually. It was an attempt to.

Paul Davies: So there's now there's the more serious stuff. *After The Deluge*. I'm not sure about *Crash Burn*...



Crash Burn (2003)

Catherine McClements Aaron Balbey

Andrew Knight: *Crash Burn* is a fusion of both.

Paul Davies: And even *Seachange* has it's moments of seriousness...

Andrew Knight: *Seachange* had some high drama. I just don't see life in Macbethian terms. It's not all gloom and doom.

Paul Davies: But *After The Deluge* certainly is the most sober work...

Andrew Knight: And it got a great reaction. John Clark once said to me it's a bad idea to tell people you're making a comedy. That's sort of how I feel about it. When you're inside the material it just dictates what you're going to do anyway. If I seen an opportunity to be funny I'll be funny. I don't set out slavishly to do jokes or anything.

Paul Davies: But watching you here at the writers festival...there's a lot of laughs in the tent when you're on.

Andrew Knight: I just get kind of bored. If I think I've got nothing particular to offer the universe here. I'll just tell a joke.

Paul Davies: Which people love of course. And anyway there's always a point under the joke...

Andrew Knight: When you look at Peter Cook and Dudley Moore who, along with Humphries, were my heroes. All of a sudden they changed the nature of what you could say. And they did it by giving licence to laugh at it. If you give people that licence then you can actually discuss it seriously. And I also think there's very few writers that have the gravitas to be serious all the time. After Shakespeare, Tolstoy

and few others it's pretty hard to do that. My insights are less insightful and more just durr...The good thing about working with Deb is that you've got two brains trying to extract where the core of an idea is. She was so useful on *After The Deluge*.

Paul Davies: Was she a co-writer on that?

Andrew Knight: She was the script editor. And because I've worked with Deb for so long her function went way beyond that. I was the writer but there's whole passages that just sound and look like Deb for me. And she was just very gracious in that. She dragged it all out of me.

Paul Davies: You've obviously had a very successful creative partnership with Deb and you spoke here about how in *Seachange* she would adopt certain characters and you'd adopt others. The male/female roles are an obvious starting point but did it reverse itself as well? She'd write a male part and you the female?

Andrew Knight: Oh yes. We've just written *Crash Burn* which is two, twinned half-hours where one follows a male and one follows a female - with lots of crossovers. Two half hours with completely contained stories, on the same night side by side except when you put them together you say Oh - the story was different. Oh I missed that and then that happened.

Paul Davies: In the 'Getting Personal' session at the Festival you were saying that the nature of 'truth' is a malleable thing.

Andrew Knight: And I think the more eloquent you are the more you can distort it. Language is the great tool of obfuscation.

Paul Davies: There's the writer character in a Dutch film called *The Fourth Man* who's giving a lecture and what he says about himself is that a writer 'lies the truth.'

Andrew Knight: Yes.

Paul Davies: In terms of your working methodology. When you come to a project you say you start from the flaws in the characters and chisel back through that to what they're really on about. And that's what drives the story.

Andrew Knight: Yes.

Paul Davies: So, before *Seachange* you're running this comedy business (Artist Services with Steve Vizard), you're keeping hundreds of people employed so much so that you're almost crying as you write sketches...and then comes

***Seachange*. You've probably been asked a 1000 times but was there a personal 'seachange' for you in going from the sketches to the drama series?**

Andrew Knight: It was strange. Most people interpreted it literally. Tim Winton has been getting stuck into us. He hated the series because he said it wasn't true. And I probably agree with him on a lot of levels. But it wasn't about dropping out. It was more about the need for a community. The need for a connection. And that was something I could respond to when I was writing it under great pressure in a room in the city. While Deb was living up here (in Byron Bay).

Paul Davies: But you come here, too. And a lot of people come to Byron with the same sort of agenda. The healing, searching for another way...a sense of community.

Andrew Knight: I do think there's something about being in contact with the natural world. It's healing. But I do think it's really rather a limited idea to say I'm dropping out. I've just got to find myself. You'll just find tedium.

Paul Davies: Well one local legend has it that if you come here to be healed you'd better move on when you are or you'll get sick all over again.

Andrew Knight: That's fantastic. I think that's exactly true. You have to have some sense of forward movement. I think it's fine to come up here and run a business but I also run into a lot of deeply depressed people who just don't know what they're doing.

Paul Davies: At the end of series 3 of *Seachange* you decide to pull the plug. It must have been one of the more interesting decisions in Australian television. The series is so popular, it hits the national pulse, it's got half the country watching, striving for a better way, something the city can't provide... But then you and Deb so no, that's it. Against all this pressure to keep going...

Andrew Knight: It wasn't quite as much pressure as you might think. At the time at the ABC - I have to keep saying that "at the time" (the Shier period) Sue Masters had just left and she was the greatest advocate for the show. The ABC hierarchy at that time many of whom waved at the crowd later and said yeah, that was us, thank you we did it, we made *Seachange* - they didn't really actually want it at the start. But Deb and I just decided we didn't want to go on with it. For the very reason we're talking about - we're just going to repeat ourselves here. And I thought we were getting a bit too baroque at the end anyway with the plots...

Paul Davies: The tunnel story?

Andrew Knight: Yeah, I don't know what I was thinking ...

Paul Davies: You were looking for a bridge to somewhere else. A way out perhaps? (laughter)

Andrew Knight: Yeah. I think I was wanting it to talk about bigger themes and yet it (Seachange) didn't have a chassis that could contain it. And I just like to get out of things before I repeat myself. Because I did so much sketch comedy, I've got this inner thing that just tells me I can't do any more of this - so I get out - probably prematurely.

Paul Davies: So you leave them wanting more.

Andrew Knight: Yeah. And we did. And when we finished, most papers in the country had us on the front page saying 'last episode tonight.' It was kind of a strange phenomenon. The whole thing. So we got out and we felt some kind of dignity in that. I just wish the last episode had been good...(laughs)

Paul Davies: But you're very modest about things generally. I kept hearing you mention the failures here at the festival. Is that some sort of self deprecating thing?

Andrew Knight: I know that I've had a lot of success. But I'm also conscious that I stiffed out a lot too. And I'm from a well mannered family. You don't talk about yourself much. John Clark had warned me that interviews were a nightmare. You also get asked questions about which you have no opinion and you fill in the gap. And it is often wrong. I also like to tell young writers it's perfectly legitimate to fuck up and fuck up a lot. It's part of the process.

Paul Davies: So only being as good as your last show doesn't apply.

Andrew Knight: I don't believe that actually. I hope not. You've got to remember Shakespeare wrote *Troilus and Cressida*. For godsake. Even the greatest can just step out.

Paul Davies: Not to mention *Titus Andronicus*

Andrew Knight: *Titus Andronicus* (laughs) even worse. I mean what was he thinking! But you don't look at a body of work and go. Ah, *Henry IV* Part - whatever ... that was a flop wasn't it? You look at the whole thing. You have to look at the body of work. I think this country has a kind of messianic view of new talent - and I'm all for getting new people and giving them a big break. But I'm more interested in their body of work at the end. That's why I gravitate towards writers who've done it a lot and pulled it off a lot. I love musicians who grow old with grace. Paul Simon, Tom Waits...

Paul Davies: You were also saying in the ‘Getting Personal’ session how their music was more moving for some of your writing students than a scene from a TV drama where a man watches the death of his daughter.

Andrew Knight: I keep saying you’ve got to give people a licence to feel.

Paul Davies: After *Crash Burn*?

Andrew Knight: I don’t know. I really don’t. I think the network want another series but I don’t know how sustainable it is. I loved doing *After the Deluge*. I loved having a big project that I could spend some time on and do the way that I wanted to.

Paul Davies: And despite your denials perhaps based or grounded in very personal experiences.

Andrew Knight: Oh yeah. I think a lot of why you write is to put closure on it yourself. To give yourself resolutions that don’t happen in real life. I think its one of the great privileges of writing. You can have a resolution.

Paul Davies: But you’ve also managed to create an opportunity for Australian television to be more personal. To get beyond the cop-show/doctor-show formulas.

Andrew Knight: I did a series with John Clark in 1985 called *The Fast Lane* and it was uneven and it was patchy. We got lots wrong but I think if people were to look at the scripts they would notice that that’s what we were doing then. And when I say John Clark and I - I was his apprentice really. But what we were trying to do was re-define the way it worked. And if that series had worked I think we would have seen more change coming. It was about marrying comedy and drama and not telling people what was what and exploring themes and taking philosophical positions...I found sketch comedy very useful for defining where a character is and making sure they had different voices. A good sketch will go quickly to the heart of the matter.

Paul Davies: There was an ensemble feel about it. You were working with great talent.

Andrew Knight: I’ve claimed way too much credit for that series. I look at the talent in that show... I just happened to be in the room at the time taking notes. You get someone like a Jane (Turner) or a Gina (Riley) or a Magda (Szbanski) and you get a pen. What I used to do was edit, harness and tie it together. I’d love to work with Ted Emery again – if you’re asking me what I’d like to do. To do a comedy with him. I know Ted would love to direct drama. But why bother... He’s the cleverest comedy director in the country. He defined how it should happen. Up to that time it was, you know, someone who had covered sport would come in. He was

a man with this constant humour. It couldn't have worked without him. There's also Andrea Denholm who's the one with the motor skills. She's an ex-lawyer and a producer and she's a writer. So she's absolutely perfect complement to us. So we're probably going to call the company now Cox Denholm Knight. Sounds more like a law firm. She's been an absolute blessing. One of those people who just gets the detail. Who's got enough creative sensibility to know when to come in. She knows how hard it is to write something. When to put pressure on. When not to.

Paul Davies: How hard is it to bring in other writers?

Andrew Knight: Very hard. We've got a bad reputation.

Paul Davies: You haven't appeared on the Writer's Guild blacklist yet.

Andrew Knight: No but we probably will. And some of it is deserved because the sort of stuff we're doing doesn't have too many precedents in this country. So when you're writing we're working in a Darwinian slime there. We had so much trouble on *Crash Burn* because we hadn't really pinned it down. We had good writers who tried very hard and we tried very hard and spent all our writing money and the scripts didn't work so we had to go back and do the whole series using some of the material. They were great writers but we hadn't established it in our own head. What it was all about.

Paul Davies: It's hard for other writers until something goes to air...

Andrew Knight: Yeah, and you think you can write. I think I could write an episode of *The Sopranos* but I probably couldn't. But I look at it and I think yeah, I know these characters but when you get to write it - it's very different. I'm a terrible editor. I just want to pick up the pen and change it. And writers hate that.

Paul Davies: The role of the editor as it's changing is increasingly becoming more a negotiator/diplomat pulling in all the network feedback and the producer/director feedback back to the writer - a clearing house rather than a creative thing...

Andrew Knight: That's why I don't like series. There's too many people involved. And sketch comedy too. We'd have 150 sketches each week, you'd end up shooting 40 of them. And most of my job was saying 'no'. You didn't have time to say think about this or that's not right... You're under so much pressure you just say: "it's not funny." Which is a fairly fatuous remark because it might be funny to someone else. But it's why Deb and I just wanted to work together. There were some great writing experiences on *Seachange* with Hannie (Rayson) and Andrea (Denholm) and with Max (Dan) and that was just a joy because they were people I'd known for a long time... it was fun, but *Crash Burn* was a lot harder because it was so complex.

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