

MY LIFE IN SOAP

Joe Deegan

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Joe Deegan, lover, body surfer and scriptwriter, originally appeared in the novel, *33 Postcards From Heaven*, by Paul Davies (Gondwana Press, 2004), and still ‘scribbles for a living’ from his beach shack on the fabled Rainbow Coast of Northern New South Wales- which he shares with his occasional partner Barbara Solomon. Joe (sans agent) is currently under-employed and available for contract work on any local series or serial. The following is an extract from his diary over a couple of months some years ago... the images are taken from *33 Postcards From Heaven – Gateway To the Rainbow Coast* (2005)

22nd September EXT. CASA DEL FIBRO (MY BACK DECK)

CAST: ME



I'm lying in the hammock, contemplating a second body surf to overcome some really depressing headlines:

“Aussie Dramas Take Local Anesthetic!”

“Where Are The Viewers?”

“The Big Turnoff”

“ ‘Siggy’ to the Rescue - Can She Save Our Industry, Again!?”

...the tabloids shriek.

And it hurts, because I have a confession to make. In the last three decades I've killed nineteen people - half a dozen serially, some by accident, others involving poison or guns. I've been married twenty times, suffered or celebrated eleven divorces (often from the same woman); and along the way, fathered thirty eight children (that I know about). I've burgled lonely milkbars or held up defenseless, but profiteering, service stations in order to fund an addiction to illicit drugs. I've settled feuds between families, cured rural animals of numberless ailments, and have betrayed, or at best, cruelly mislead most of my significant others. I've also participated in one ménage à trois, and deux ménage à quatres.

Yes, I am for my sins, forgive me dear diary, an Australian teledramatist. And therefore one of those partly responsible for the miserable crop of headlines above.

This is how I know that “Siggy” (aka Sigrid Thornton) cannot save our industry. Nor can any of her colleagues: the many talented local actors who have given us such wonderful renditions of who we are, and how we speak and love and hate each other over so many years of hits and misses on all the networks.

They can't do it because actors acting alone (without the aid of writers) are not a pretty sight. You only have to look at the abysmal failure of most 'improvised' film, theatre and television to realise this. The meaningless, circulatory exchanges of dialogue (that seem to run longer than an American Series' opening credits), all such scenes leave audiences catatonic with boredom. (Did some one say “*Wildside*”?)

Elsewhere, in the so called example of “Reality” (sic) television, untrained twenty-somethings are plunged into a synthetic prison where they engage in acutely embarrassing behavior while trying to pretend that their every waking

and sleeping moment isn't being closely monitored by millions of people. Could anything be less 'real'?

Clearly actors need words - the words writers give them to say inside the carefully nuanced plots we have constructed for their 'characters' to inhabit. Dentists put instruments, a writer puts words in other people's mouths. That's their job. It's what teledramatists do. Why people like me are so vital and necessary. When will anybody with the power to do something about it finally comprehend this fundamental fact!? Writers are experts in the frailty and vanity of human behavior. We only need to look at ourselves for the research.

Unfortunately, for Australian producers, there is no hollywood-ised, bankable star-system in place that will guarantee bums on lounge suites in both western Sydney and eastern Melbourne. Attempting to capture these two markets simultaneously is the black hole into which most local dramas fall. If a show rates well in only one city it is doomed to being swiftly bumped to some demeaning, late-night timeslot. Where it quickly withers and dies. It takes a huge amount of cunning and misrepresentation to appeal to two such dissimilar audience catchments. One shamelessly material and shallow, the other intellectually snobbish and inward looking.

So "Siggy" can't save us, nor can any other actor or producer or director...

A cheeky currawong comes up and sits on my work table, leaving its calling card on the scene breakdown for the next episode of *On Golden Sands* - the soapie I currently soil for my living on. It seems a fitting comment. One critic was kind enough to call *OGS* "an appalling joke. So bad it isn't even laughable". I think of the arrogance of birds and all the heart and soul I have poured into this show. Only to see my sparkling dialogue and witty choreography blanded out by the team of young script editors coming up behind me. I think of the Roman Eagle, and how it was copied and ripped off by the Nazis.

23rd Sept. EXT. MY BACK DECK

CAST: ME (again, unfortunately)



Point Paradise

Wind a light nor' easterly picking up a perfectly curling break off Point Paradise. Will have first body surf after wake-up skinny cap.

Yet my depression congeals. The bad headlines are working up to a media frenzy. All the dreaded opinion writers have now picked up on an easy story. A free bash at the tall poppies:

“Local Series Flop!”

“Another Slump In Ratings!”

“Surviving A Week Of Oz On The Box”

“ABC Cuts Production Slate For Fourth Year”

The one thing Australians love more than success is outright failure. You know your career's in trouble when words like 'flop', 'slump', 'surviving' or 'cuts' start appearing in the opinion writers' pretty limited vocabulary.

The problem is so bad, the elision of the writer so complete, that most viewers do now actually think the actors make up the words themselves! How self-effacing and low status can my profession get? Anyone who knows anything about acting or writing quickly realises that most soapie stars are barely capable

of forging their own Logie nominations - let alone write down or hold in their limited intellects anything so sensitive and delicate as an actual dramatic idea... Can't the hack journos get it through their thick heads!? What's wrong with local teledrama is that the writer has virtually disappeared from the process!

Not just from the pages of the trade magazines (where we've hardly ever been conspicuous), but quite literally from the interminable opening credit sequence at the head of each episode (now sometimes running halfway into the programme!). I know, because I carefully scrutinize the names, wondering how people with such limited talent could get on the active writers' list of shows that didn't even respond to my CV.

I watch enviously as the Production Designer, Casting Agency, Best Boy and Third AD all get a guernsey and I wait in vain to see who wrote the obvious shambles that's about to follow (since no one is prepared to put their name to the thing in the box once marked 'author').

Call me an unreconstructed hippy romantic idealist, but I firmly believe that the soul of any dramatically realised enterprise is intimately connected to the soul of the person who dreamed up the thing in the first place. And in many cases now, that original, unique identity is being split in half.

The process of 'storylining' (plot wrangling) has been systemically divorced from the process of dialogue writing. With the predictable end result that nothing terribly eccentric, dangerous, visionary, or different can filter through the many layers of intellectual, egotistical and proprietorial gatekeeping that scars and damages any TV script on its painful journey towards final shooting draft (with pink amendments). Nobody is bold or adventurous or just plain free enough to be crazy any more.

I drop the offending and offensive newspapers into the compost bin, ignite a mid-morning "pick-me-up" – sourced from an excellent grower near Nimbin, and allow my gaze to wander out across Casa Del Fibro's backyard - my own little handkerchief of Paradise - flashing on the fact that the whole idea of a garden is to produce flowers. Insight still on track. Thank Gaia.

Besides, if drugs in sport are no-no, drugs in writing are a virtual prerequisite.

24th Sept. INT. MY OFFICE/GARAGE
CAST: ME (yes, still me!)



Author at work

Dear Diary, this morning's workload (two scenes) dashed off in under twenty minutes. New record. Leaves afternoon free for leisurely stroll to Point Paradise.

Reduced again to mere dialoguing! We used to call ourselves 'screenwriters'! What a joke. How often have I stared, incredulous, at the awful tripe one of my scripts gets reduced to on air. Watching alone, at home, like the few hundred other tragic losers capable of staying up until *On Golden Sands*' post-midnight timeslot... barely alive in front of the box, waiting with zombie-like concentration for the next batch of ads for softer beds, faster food, or more powerful stimulants - all the rubbish that people awake this time of night so obviously need.

Can't they see? Don't the networks get it!! It's only shows that have been the outcome of a single writer, or small-scale writing partnership, that put the runs on the board: *Mother And Son*, *Sea Change*, *Blue Murder*, *The Scales Of Justice*, *Kath & Kim*, *Changi*, *Love My Way* and *The Secret Life Of Us*. It's only when the writer is in charge that it ever really works.

Why do the network gatekeepers, in their sheltered workshops, have to learn the same lesson over and over again? You can make a bad film from a good script, but never a good film from a bad one! No matter who your "stars" are.

Is it any wonder the viewers are turning off in droves? Why, if these people at the top are paid so much, why can't they see it?! What do they do all day? Wankers.

25th Sept. EXT. PURGATORY BEACH
CAST: ME (still the star of my own show - finally)



Purgatory Beach on a busy day

Surf this morning almost unbelievable. You get waves this perfect only several times a year. No rips. Water temp a divine 20 degrees celsius. Again the perfect curling breakers. I file away a new idea for a title for something: "The Shape Of Waves". Bit wanky, but still...

Re-read yesterday's rant. Have to admit that collaborative writing is not always a bad experience, or necessarily an exercise in committee-speak or groupthink. Being a small cog in a well oiled story department can be a wonderful, socially enlivening exercise (especially for lonely scribblers like me who mostly work at home). Unfortunately, this is rare, and probably only occurred once in my brilliant career during a short stint on *Something In The Air*. Here at last was a series where writers were actually encouraged to be part of the script development process...

Until somebody pointed out that this involved paying us more money. Then they made sure we were once again spoon fed scene breakdowns - like the writers on every other soapie. Naturally the show collapsed shortly afterwards and a brave new experiment folded amidst the general debacle of what used to be called

‘ABC Drama’. It was only a victory for those who know the cost of everything and the value of nothing...

At one stage, a junior editor on *Something In The Air* (who no one would trust with a script), actually got to update the “bible” for the show: a chronicle of names, dates and places that had been added to the fictional landscape after two years on air. A kind of social geography of Emu Springs. It showed that mountains had been named and climbed. That there were valleys, creeks and streams, streets, hospitals, pubs, farms, footy teams, and neighbouring towns- all dreamed up by teams of writers, editors and storyliners. Great wheeling narrative arcs had been set in place that involved the lives and inter-twinings of many scores of individual characters.

No literary artifact on this scale has ever been produced in the history of writing. The average television series or serial is a colossus of collaborative creativity running sometimes to many hundreds of episodes. Of course, certain Victorian novels first appeared in episodic form in popular magazines and ran for months. The work of Dickens, Trollop and Hardy reached a huge, new audience. Nor was illiteracy any barrier, since people could go to “penny readings” where each new installment was recited out loud. Dickens himself made a fortune from his many live tours.

In the end, however, these works of fiction were published as a single book. Whereas, in a series like *Homicide* or *Blue Heelers* or *Neighbours* with their many episodes, the narrative arc stretches out over the creative equivalent of scores of novels spread out over years or even decades. Now you can buy little novellas of the various *Neighbours* story arcs at any Post Office.

Yet the underlying problem remains... The networks in their eternal struggle for ratings and in the blind panic that accompanies any new series’ launch, have lost sight of the very thing they need to cultivate in order to attract an audience in the first place. People will always respond to a show that speaks to some deep, inner truth they all share and can relate to, portraying characters they accept as credible, fallible and familiar. And this only happens when a single ‘authorial voice’ is in charge.

the dozen or so regular characters with locked-in contracts. A few quirky but telegenic locations are thrown into the mix and everyone goes home for a well earned post-prandial nap.

Step 3. All the guys on the board (the former car salesmen and shopping centre property developers who actually own the network – and they are all guys) declare they love it immediately... and by the way if it doesn't rate it's socks off from the pilot episode on, the Head of Drama better start looking round for a Noosa or Port Douglas travel/accommodation package that could incorporate some career counselling and personal re-development time.

Step 4. The shit really starts hitting the fan when the Casting Department suddenly discover that no actor worth their salt is going to commit to three years of emotional compression on a soapie that might go to 11pm after the first series.

Step 5. The panic spreads from the upper echelons of the network's Drama Department (via the consultants, mates and script executives) down to some lucky/unlucky local producer who submitted that dog of an idea and now gets the wake up call that s/he's got about two weeks to cobble together a production office and commission the sets- along with cast, crew, locations and oh yes, scripts for their brilliant idea. The the local producer is in a state of shock because s/he hasn't even looked at that submission for over 18 months - when s/he got the last knockback and decided it wasn't worth wasting any more time on.

Step 6. Writers who can remain sober before lunchtime are dragged away from their afternoon schooners and offered a chance to get their first episode on the show just right. Various proposed "active (sic) writers lists" are emailed between the Head of Drama in Sydney and the producers in Melbourne and promptly rejected by Sydney. This usually means that the soon to be appointed trainee script editors will have about two days to rewrite all the first drafts.

Step 7. Meanwhile, a pilot is rushed into production that everyone hopes will pass muster at the test screenings in the Market Researcher's basement laboratory in South Melbourne. Here a small sample of the target audience, like an advertisers' jury, is asked to sit and pass judgement on the work-in-progress. Upon their fickle, brainless, uninformed response

hangs the final commitment of money. But by now everyone already knows the series is going to be a dreadful flop because the writers have finally been allowed to view the audition tapes of the actors who got the major roles and they're uniformly hopeless.

Step 8. In order to facilitate the grueling, 4 hours-a-week, on-air serial production target (to fill the local content quota and get the Network out of a big fine and massive bad publicity), the nucleus of a Story Department is formed and collectively it must quickly furnish the huge outpouring of words required to keep the production crew in constant motion by fleshing out the first 39 episodes (equivalent to about 30 hours of drama, given every episode has about 15 minutes of ads). Thus, in order to speed up the scriptwriting process and save both time and money, the essential business of plotting the show is umbilically separated from the drafting of dialogue and choreographing of movement that must follow.

Step 9. And this is where things start to seriously unravel. A fatal split occurs as two separate writing entities are established: one, a bunch of storyliners, researchers, script co-ordinators and editor/negotiators who are in-house, relatively job secure, and required to turn up for work everyday - where they proceed to sit around big whiteboards and start mapping out the story arcs of the series or serial before them (no one ever quite decides whether it is a series or a serial).

Step 10. The other writing entity is a loose collection of shambolic freelancers with addictive personalities who work singly at home like pieceworkers in the mini word-factory of their own private studios. These are the dialoguists (formerly writers) who must invent the speeches to go with the absurd scenarios handed down to them by the in-house team above - while seamlessly and simultaneously stitching together the gaping holes in their silly plotlines.

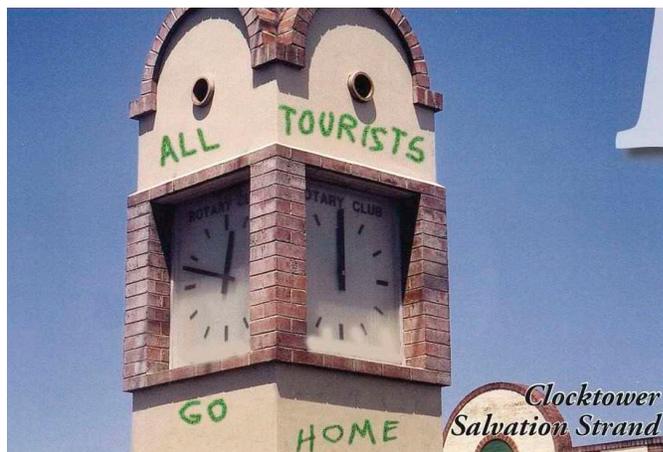
Step 11. The writers are handed their contract and small down payment at the 'Scene Breakdown Conference' where their status is now so low they must even pay for their own tea and coffee. (You'd think just once they'd let us go downstairs to the studio and graze across the leftovers of the gourmet feast provided for the crew. But no, that doesn't happen.)

Step 12. The writer/dialoguist's job is to mentally inhabit the given handful of sets and hear the characters speaking (a patently schizophrenic and psychologically damaging process - hence the addictions). But they must always do so within the strict limits of the handed-down scene breakdown.

Yet the process of writing must itself be a journey of discovery or it won't work. The fun and attraction is in the detours and what you find when the plot breaks down. (Which it always does). To simply follow a sanitised, unchangeable road map is to produce an efficient progression from A to B, but it's an experience of travel that, for the audience at least, remains predictable and completely underwhelming.

And this is how everything gets blanded out.

27th Sep. EXT. CAFÉ CELESTIAL
ME, N/S LOCAL ARTISTS, N/S CHANNELERS , N/S HEALERS



View from the Café Celestial

I'm sitting at the Café Celestial across from the clock tower on Salvation Strand with its provocative but understandable graffiti and it's colourfully inaccurate depiction of the right time. Just finishing another of Max's (the barista's) excellent skinny caps. Today's workload over by 10.30 am. Picked up *Nirvana News* to find that local producers are mounting a counter attack on behalf of Our Industry. Of course they claim they haven't got the money to compete with the enormous sums thrown at American series (imported by local Networks at a massive discount). But whenever in the history of 'motion pictures' (sic) did high production values guarantee an audience? Look at *Young Lions*, look at *Alice*, *Water Rats*, *Dogs Head Bay*.

The chief failure of any drama is always to be found not in the size of the budget but in the quality of the story. The only hope is soap. But why can't television serials be more intelligent and sophisticated?

Next, we'll get directors telling us that they aren't given enough opportunities, actors that they have no continuity of employment, and crews that the lunches have gone down hill. They're all only waiting for the feature break that will get them to Hollywood and out of here. Traitors.

Sept 28th EXT. PEARLY GATES HOTEL
ME, N/S DRINKERS, N/S BAKPAKAHS



Magnificent Mt. Lookout!

Sitting with an excellent Hunter Valley chardy in the Pearly Gates' beergarden, enjoying another rainbow-clad sunset over Mt Lookout, realising (yet again!) that scriptwriting is no career for slackers. Gold and silver coins lie spread across the table in front of me. Just enough for another glass.

I realize now there's little praise, or appreciation of our work as writers. What you finally see on air hardly resembles anything you handed in at second draft. At best I might recognise one or two lines of dialogue. All my brilliant wit and Irish turn of phrase neutered by some twenty-something kid with the life experience of a phytoplankton.

Most Australian teledramatists are proficient, hard-working, funny, zany, mad but dedicated artists. The main problem is - we just don't get to tell our own stories anymore. There are so many points of control and filtering out of anything different or odd. The chances of some individual voice emerging from the whole exercise is approximately zero.

Can't the opinion writers see it? Are they so blind? What pitiful excuses for journalists they are! The thing that's wrong with Australian television is that most of it isn't Australian! It's American. American franchises and British costume drama. That's Australian television. This is not only true in terms of hours of drama put to air, but in the way that 'local' shows imitate American styles. It's why there's so many Cops and Doctors. Why crime and bad health have become the dramatic staples of the hollywoodised, televisual world. All because it's easier to plot. In a crime or an illness the drama is built in. It's lazy writing. Only the soaps with their settings in a community (prison, village, apartment block, suburb, school room) and their mapping of the vagaries of the human heart, offer any kind of hope for something real to break through.

As Raymond Williams clearly saw thirty years ago (in *Television- Technology And Cultural Form*)... "more drama is watched in a single weekend by today's average viewer than most people, through most of human history, would have seen in their entire lifetime."

Modern humans are saturated with drama. Our consciousness is altered by the sheer amount of synthetic human behavior that we consciously or unconsciously observe. So what are we doing to this enormous audience !? Why can't our local industry be the shining light that shows people how to behave nobly, generously, charitably towards each other? Why must our teledrama always be so violent, so negative, so destructive? I ask without getting any satisfactory answer...

29th Sept. EXT. LIMBO CREEK
CAST: ME (alone again, unfortunately)



Lovely Limbo Creek meets Purgatory Beach

Gave myself a “Day Off” today, a well earned rest between segments for the current episode of *On Golden Sands*. Spent mainly sunbaking on the dunes where Limbo Creek meets Purgatory Beach. The malaise continues...Wasted last night watching Channel 9’s *50 Years/50 Shows*- celebrating five decades of Australian Television. I am told that the second most important series ever made is the *Paul Hogan Show*. Just behind Graham Kennedy’s iconic *In Melbourne Tonight*. All comedy and variety. The closest a local drama gets is *Brides Of Christ* at number 5 – just ahead of the *Don Lane Show* but well behind the *Opening Of The Sydney Olympics*. And while I’ve got nothing against guys who wear tight shorts and footy jerseys with the sleeves cut out, and hang around with a mate who seems to suffer intellectual impairment while constantly wearing a life saver’s cap, and while Graham Kennedy was no doubt a very talented man, to discover that these characters are the high water mark of my beloved industry!?! No wonder I feel so low. Will need serious lubrication this afternoon.

Oct 2nd EXT.

NULLUMBAH AIRPORT

CAST: ME, N/S PASSENGERS, N/S AIRLINE STAFF



Busy Nullumbah Airport

Sitting in the shed that passes for Nullumbah Airport's waiting room - awaiting RuralAir's tiger moth that will take me to another one-day script conference in Sydney for episode 4765 of *On Golden Sands*. Tomorrow I will be handed another blanded out Scene Breakdown that I must find the dialogue for. Dialogue that will be quickly rewritten as soon as I hand it in. Why don't I just shoot myself and end the misery now? Perhaps the moth will crash and save me the trouble.

More depressing news as I gaze in vacant wonderment at the national tabloids. Another bombing outrage in Bali. The 'War' on Horrorism continues as we're told that more of our basic human rights will have to be shed in the interests of 'security' - whatever that is.

The great George Orwell saw it coming when he predicted in 1984 that "the 'War' will be eternal." That there will always be a threat we must arm ourselves against. It's how the elites maintain control. There is a sickness loose upon the world. And it's us! Life is a sexually transmitted disease. And it's terminal! I started in this business believing, like Genet, that every writer must be fired with a burning desire to change the world...So much for youthful idealism.

Later, in the plane flying south, listening to *Late Night Live* on my complimentary headphones, I recall that Phillip Adams once famously asked:

“Has it really been 25 years of Australian Television or just the same year over and over again?”

Now another 25 years have passed since his cheeky remark. And I ask the same question. Has it really been 50 years of Australian Television or still the same year over and over again?

No- that’s just too paranoid. And depressing (if its true).

If word got out I thought like that I’d never work for a Network again...

Paul Davies is best known for his location theatre work (including *Storming Mont Albert By Tram*) and first discovered the exciting connection between pretending and public funding when he won one pound in a smiling competition at the Vogue Picture Theatre, Ipswich in 1956. He has since kept audiences mildly amused through eight plays (mostly for TheatreWorks), six documentaries, two features and too many scripts on a dozen different television series- from *Homicide* to *The Sullivans* and more recently *Something In The Air* and *Stingers*.

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