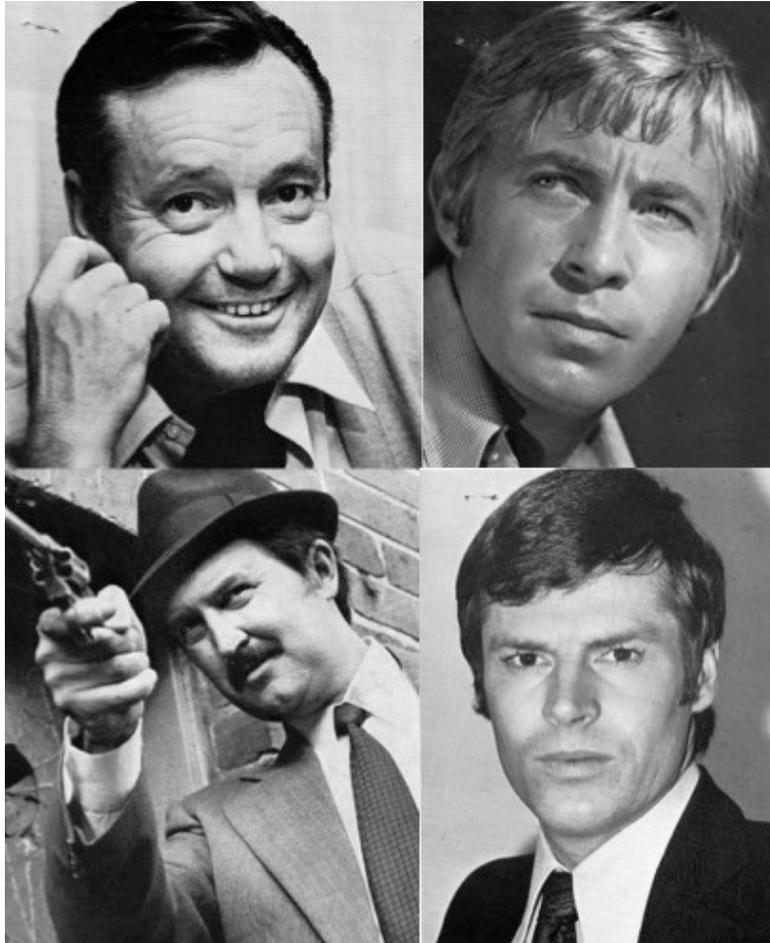


KILLING HOMICIDE
(The Demise Of A Cultural Icon)

Paul Davies
METRO #149 (2006)



The Last “Gang of Four”

Top: Bud Tingwell, Dennis Grosvenor

Bottom: Don Barker, Gary Day

HOMICIDE

Initially rejected by the Nine Network, *Homicide* was made by Crawford Productions for Channel Seven where it enjoyed an unbroken, twelve year run from 1964 to 1975, achieving a total production slate of 510 hour-length episodes. This enduring success, with consistently high ratings, helped establish the viability of Australian television drama generally. *Homicide* was compared to Britain's *Z Cars* and America's *Naked City*. Its local roots were Crawford's earlier police radio drama *D24*, and the courtroom-based *Consider Your Verdict*. *Homicide's* low budget constraints were innovatively deployed to replicate a certain gritty, suburban realism. Plots were taken from real life cases. Chases were more on foot than by car. Stunts were done by the actors themselves. An early decision to clearly acknowledge the location as Melbourne enhanced its appeal with local viewers who, amidst a plethora of imported product, were seeing their own streets and backyards, and hearing their own vernacular represented on the small screen for the first time. The original cast of John Fegan, Terry McDermott and Lex Mitchell were soon joined by Leonard Teale (Sen. Det. David 'Mac' Mackay) who became the squad's longest serving detective, making a special re-appearance for the final episode ("The Last Task"). Other key actors in a rotating squad of three or four, included Alwyn Kurts, John Stanton and 'Bud' Tingwell. Later episodes were shot entirely on 16mm film, allowing greater access to both exterior and interior locations. Fashioned within the show's fixed narrative structure (of murder, investigation, arrest – all viewed strictly from the police point of view) these final episodes became effectively short (42 minute) features, providing an apt training ground for many of the key players in the Australian New Wave film movement that followed *Homicide's* demise in 1975. These included directors George Miller, Simon Wincer, David Stevens, Kevin Dobson and Igor Auzins, as well as screenwriters Keith Thompson, Peter Schreck, Phil Friedman, Cliff Green and Everette de Roche.

From *A Companion to the Australian Media*
(Macquarie University 2014)
Paul Davies

Although I didn't realise it at the time, in 1975 I was effectively the last script editor on the classic Aussie cop show, *Homicide*. Around May news filtered down that the Network, unhappy with the way things were going, had just cancelled the last eight scripts! Ones that I had just released for production. This was an unprecedented intrusion into a show's executive independence, especially one that had been in continuous and successful motion for eleven years.

And, although the ratings were down from the stratospheric fifties and forties of its golden period, *Homicide* was still garnering the kind of audience numbers that producers today would rejoice over (and probably take the entire production staff out to lunch for). It was unheard of for Channel Seven to actually *read* a release draft of any *Homicide* script, let alone *cancel* eight in a row!

BASIC HOMICIDE FORMAT - NEW WRITERS' GUIDANCE

SEGMENT	ONE	TWO	THREE	FOUR	FIVE	SIX		
DRAMA LEVEL								
SCENES	4	9	10	10	9	8	TOTAL 50	
TIME	3 MINS	8 MINS	9 MINS	9 MINS	8 MINS	6 MINS	45.30 MIN.	
FORMAT	* MURDER OR DISCOVERY OF BODY **	FIRST COMMERCIAL *** BEGIN WITH POLICE AT SCENE INTRODUCE CENTRAL NON POLICE CHARACTERS HAVING INTERESTED AUDIENCE, GET THE STORY GOING HEAVY POLICE INVOLVEMENT	SECOND COMMERCIAL REAL CHARACTER AND STORY	THIRD COMMERCIAL CHARACTER EXPLORATION DEVELOPMENT	FOURTH COMMERCIAL POLICE APPROACH THE POINT OF SOLVING THE CASE	FIFTH COMMERCIAL SOLUTION AND EVENTUAL APPREHENSION OF KILLER Narration.	SIXTH COMMERCIAL	

N.B. * "Homicide" super over opening shot.
 ** Stock opening into commercial.
 *** Title and writer's credit, 10 seconds

How to write a Homicide script.
The basic template

The above graph shows the classic Homicide/teledrama structure given to all writers on the show: starting with the discovery of the body in the opening three minute ‘teaser’, and then building DRAMA LEVEL up through four ad breaks and on to the climax of the murderer’s capture in the second last segment. Followed by a summary of his conviction and gaol sentence. Always seeing everything from the police point of view.

The crisis of eight cancelled scripts meant, of course, that some lowly, blamable entity (namely the current script editor), would have to concoct an ‘acceptable’ replacement script in less than three days - simply in order to keep the show’s sixty five permanent staff in some semblance of gainful employment.

Alas, Episode 511: “*Double Take*”, the last ever *Homicide*, co-written by Adrian Davies-Moore (a plainly fanciful name) and directed by the remarkable Igor Auzins, didn’t save the series. Shortly afterwards, the dreaded Network guillotine fell, and a brave experiment in local teledrama was over.

So who murdered the men in pork pie hats? And why did they have such narrow brims when the whole idea of a hat is to keep the sun off?

The simple answer is: Network 7 killed the nation’s flagship drama series. They wielded the sharp implement. (This was an axe murder after all). But why did such a successful, cutting edge, local teledrama have to die so swiftly and with such little ceremony ? Like an embarrassment, instead of the great achievement it was.

In the tradition of any good *Homicide* script, we must start with the body:

Eleven years old is positively geriatric for any television series. A certain senility takes over about year seven (look at *Blue Heelers*, *Neighbours*, *Home And Away*). The formula just runs out of puff. Yet *Homicide* had been able to keep re-inventing itself through many changes to the core cast (15 detectives in all) and constant technological upgrading (from clunky three-camera black and white video in a couple of studio sets to highly portable 16mm colour film shot on locations all over Melbourne). In it’s final incarnation, each episode of the show was approached almost like an auteured mini-feature.

Actors of the calibre of John Hargreaves, Noni Hazelhurst, Pamela Stephenson and Simon Chilvers were taking major guest roles. And many later feature directors like George Miller, Simon Wincer, David Stevens, Paul Eddy and Igor Auzins, cut their directorial teeth on these final *Homicide* episodes.

Some, like Kevin Dobson with *Long Weekend*, were inventing their own film style, in this case a grainy, Ken Loachy kind of look to carry Keith Thompson's taut little love story about a troubled teenager (Noni Hazelhurst) and her tragic low-life boyfriend (John Geros). Along with three other contemporary episodes, *Long Weekend* was deemed unsuitable for screening before 8.30pm by the Broadcasting Control Board, further jeopardizing *Homicide's* place in the Network schedule.

In *Free Enterprise* George Miller told the story of a group of residents, including some communists, who took on a corrupt government bureaucracy in order to halt the re-development of their street. In John Drew's *Why All The Fuss* the show literally lived up its often misspelt title 'Homocide' when the boys in pork pie hats found Doug Lambert (Grigor Taylor) bashed and bleeding from a vicious homophobic attack. In another episode by John Drew called *Charlie*, Drew tackled the twin minefields of mental illness and paedophilia. Other stories were concerned with child abuse (*The Life And Times Of Tina Kennedy*), abortion, and murders that occur as a result of the aggression inherent in excessive alcohol consumption - stuff that didn't go down terribly well with some of the Networks major advertisers, particularly large corporations involved in the brewing of hops.

What Channel Seven wanted was good, clean, plain-old family oriented detective work where the principal cast - the 'gang of four' - were the major focus and the audience could never be allowed to get ahead of them by discovering what the crims were up to first.

But for any writer struggling with the rigid *Homicide* format, (see the graph of the 'basic template' above) the guest characters were the ones you got to make up yourself. Plus, there was now a greater opportunity to spread the storytelling. Under the aegis of producers like Igor Auzins, Paul Eddy and Henry Crawford, the *Homicide* writers could basically tackle any issue they liked. Subjects they were passionate about. Luis Bayonas, being Spanish, always wrote murders involving blades. Jim Simmonds could be counted on to do something with a sport - usually the martial arts. John Drew tackled the hard social stuff. As did Keith Thompson and Peter Shreck.

Yet on the 18th June 1975, attempting to stem the rot, and running up the surrender flag, Hector Crawford announced in an All Staff Memo, that Igor Auzins was being replaced as producer by Don Battye. In the *TV Times* two weeks later, Mr. Battye was quoted as saying the show had become "sensational, and too involved in social issues. We've got to get back to the basic idea and that's murder". In a 7.30 time slot. Suitable for family viewing - goes without saying.

But even this didn't work because the axe kept falling and soon sixty five people (along with many other contracted artists) were out of a job. Within a several months Crawfords' other cop shows, *Division 4* and *Matlock Police* were also cast into the dust bin of history.

It looked like payback. Crawford Productions had not only proven that local teledrama could find and keep an audience, but had actively campaigned on behalf of local content through its backing of the *TV Make It Australian Committee* - continuing a fight that stretched back to the company's bid for the license of Australia's third commercial channel- the 0/10 Network in 1964, the year *Homicide* started.

At that time Hector Crawford pushed forward the staggering idea that this proposed new network should be a 'local content only' affair. An unheard of proposition that threatened to set a bad example for the free flow (flood, tidal wave) of American and British product onto our small screens. Not surprisingly, Hector lost out to Reg Ansett in that bid for 0/10, and 11 years later, Crawford Productions was brought to its knees by the sudden cancellation of three quarters of its cash flow. A move that seemed to culturally pre-empt the larger destabilization and eventual dismissal of the Whitlam Government in Canberra five months later.

The Box - itself an almost documentary account of what went on in the company- kept Crawfords on a respirator through the lean months of late '75 and early '76, until *The Sullivans* once again produced a mega hit for Ian Jones and Henry Crawford, thus ensuring the company's survival for the next half decade.

Is eleven years long enough for a series to be on air?

Probably. But *Homicide* was breaking new ground, dealing with tough social and political issues and still finding a respectably large enough sized audience.

The show had started, like its radio predecessor *D24*, as something made for and with the full co-operation of the Victorian Police Force - who obviously saw it as great PR. Indeed, in the early days, innocent bystanders, not recognizing a film crew, would dive in and try to rescue stunt dummies from crashed cars. But by 1975 the show was dealing with a much more complex approach to law and order. Something the police hierarchy were obviously less interested in being associated with. It clouded the message.

Were there too many cop shows on Australian television at the time?

Undoubtedly. But what else is new ? Cops, Doctors and Soaps are the staples.

Was there a cultural conspiracy to stifle local content by bringing down its principle flag bearer ?

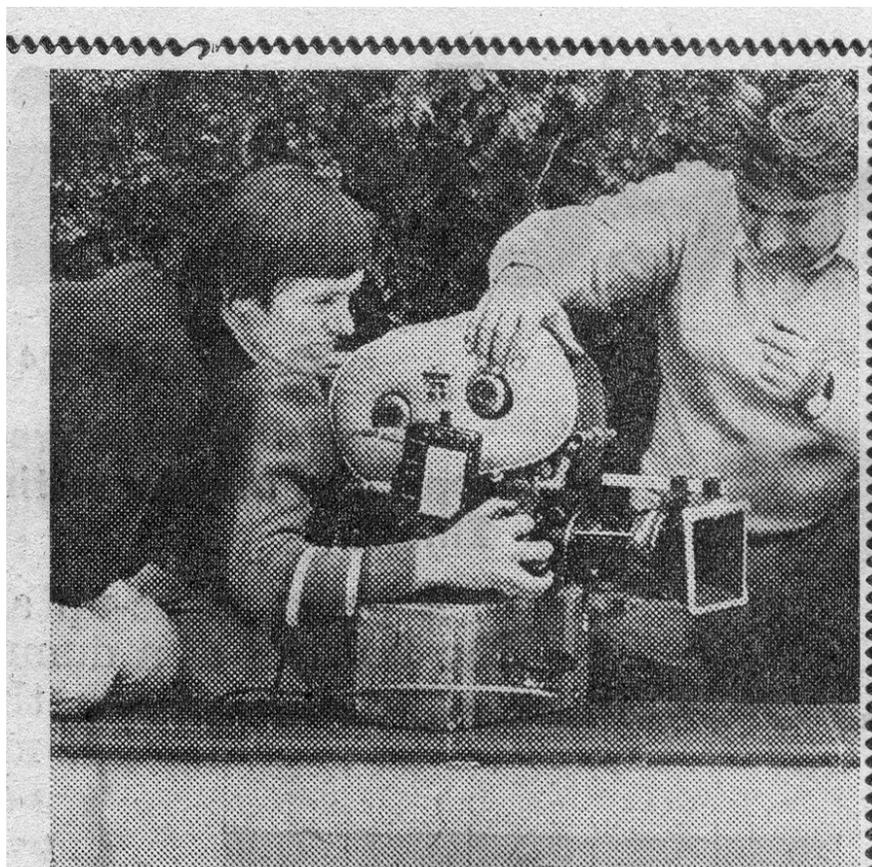
Who knows? And, without going undercover, like *Homicide's* offspring *Stingers*, how could you ever prove it ? In this sense it also mirrors the problem of the larger destabilisation of the Whitlam Government. There will never be a smoking gun (police issue .32 calibre).

Only one thing is certain: in mid- 1975 there was a decision made to terminate Australia's first really successful drama series at a moment when it had become a fascinating experiment in expressive filmmaking. As an incurable hippy romantic, one pipe dream I still have relates to how Australia might have found itself today if the Crawford and Whitlam cultural and political agendas had been allowed to win through and flourish.

I imagine an impossibly clever, confident and benevolent society with real economic, racial and gender equality. One that still has free tertiary education, universal health cover, a viable social security net, respect for Native Title, and a publicly owned banking, telecommunications and transport infrastructure.

I also imagine such a society would almost certainly have a film and teledrama industry that was at the cutting edge of world entertainment; yet one which still gave a voice to its own community, always breaking new ground, and ready to celebrate every kind of local hero (with or without a pork pie hat).

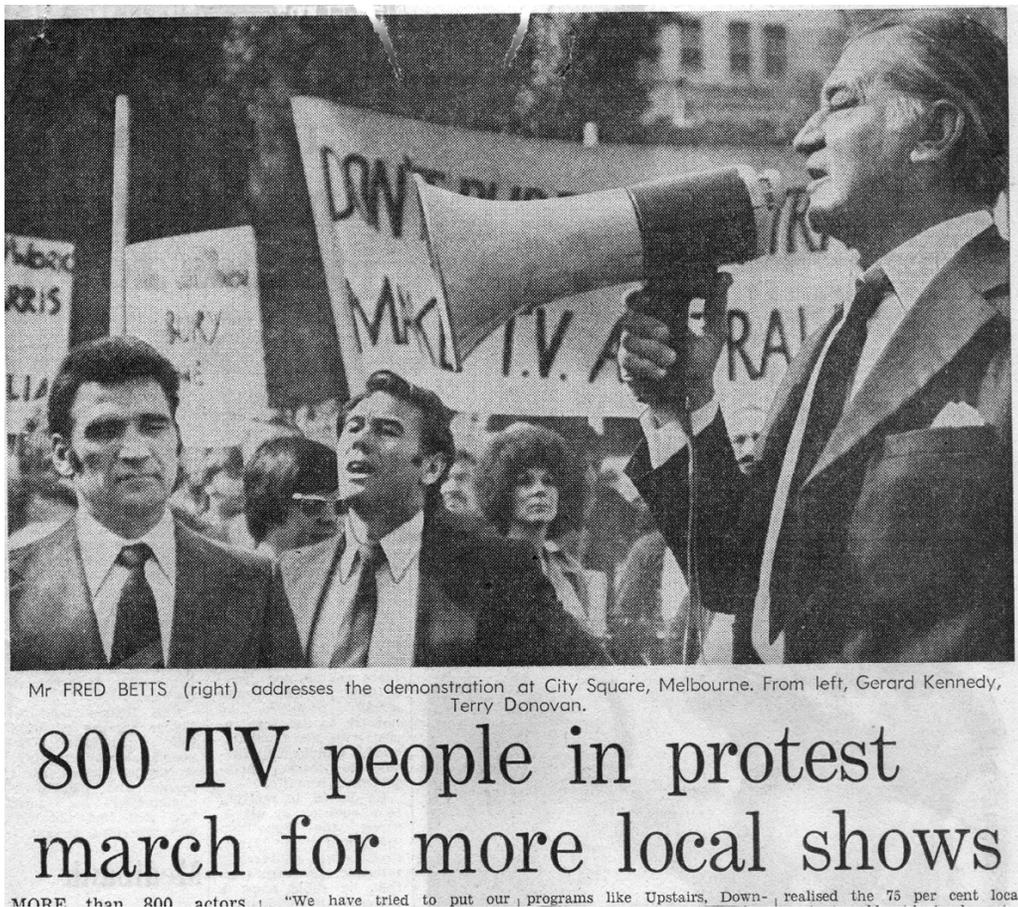
Oh well, I said it was a dream...



Logie winning director Igor Auzins, left, in action.

so long against the has entered in the TV

Penultimate *Homicide* producer Igor Auzins in action on Episode 474 “*Why All the Fuss*” written by John Drew – a gay bashing story shot around Hector Crawford’s home swimming pool. On June 18th 1975 Auzins was replaced by Don Battye who called for less “sensationalism and social issues” and more murder.



“Life imitating art imitating life: Fred Betts (who played the Hector Crawford character in *The Box*) rousing the masses to action to defend local content on Australian TV. In the background Lieutenants Gerard Kennedy and Terry Donovan (Jason’s dad) both playing cops on *Division 4* – another hugely successful Crawfords cop show - stand by for crowd control, ready to draw on their extensive combined acting experience playing both crims and detectives)



Awgie Award winning teledramatist Paul Davies ‘feathers’ another ‘Final Draft’
Homicide towards perfection.

Davies was the last script editor on *Homicide* and the first one on *The Sullivans*. He has since written more than a hundred episodes of a dozen different television series, as well as seven plays including *Storming Mont Albert By Tram* which kicked off Melbourne’s location theatre movement. His first novel *Postcards From Heaven* was published in 2004 by Gondwana Press.