

YOUR TYPICAL MINI- SERIES:

BASTARD BOYS

On the night of 17 April 1998, I stood on Swanston Dock with several thousand other people. Each of us supported the embattled Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) in its dispute with Patrick Stevedores and the federal Liberal Government.

By Rjurik Davidson

MY ARMS WERE LINKED with those of two of my friends and scattered through the crowd were other friends and acquaintances of mine. There was no chance of movement around the crowd; it was pressed too closely together. But as is so often the case with now-distant events, the specific memories are shadowy and vague. I think it was cold. At some point, then ACTU secretary Bill Kelty spoke on a megaphone. He was too far away from me to hear, but in any case one of my friends, no supporter of the Labor Party, yelled out, 'I remember the pilot's strike, Kelty.' Among the activist Left there was already a premonition of the impending compromise brokered by the ALP-led union leadership and the management of Patrick's.

During the middle of the night, lines of police slowly approached the crowd. They came in single lines, advancing perhaps twenty metres in front of each other, before stopping, like some kind of ominous parade ground manoeuvre. They never came closer to the picket line (called a 'peaceful assembly' to comply with the industrial relations laws) than perhaps fifty metres. By early morning, construction workers approached the picket from behind

ALL IMAGES FROM *BASTARD BOYS*





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the police lines. Eventually the police retreated as dawn was breaking. It was a pivotal moment in the dispute, for it indicated the inability of the government to break the strike using force.

***Bastard Boys* and realism**

The ABC's miniseries, *Bastard Boys*, does a fairly accurate job of representing this night on the docks. But the emphasis must be on 'fairly' rather than 'accurate'. Firstly, the numbers of protesters and police in the television series are noticeably smaller than the actual numbers present on the night, as one would expect from a television drama with limited funding. In the series, the police approach the picket much closer than they did on the night, and the construction workers approach the police closer as well, so that the scene can be shot from above, looking down on the police surrounded by protesters. Perhaps furthest from historical reality is the threat of violence which presents fictional character Sean McSwain (Anthony Hayes) with his pivotal moment of self-development. Speaking over the megaphone, he ensures that the demonstration remains peaceful and the police are able to evacuate from the 'pincer movement' of assembly and construction workers, when violence could seemingly erupt at any moment – with this action he becomes a leader and a 'grown

man'. While there is no doubt that the potential for violence is ever-present at demonstrations and from some demonstrators, such actions were unlikely that night. The discipline of the picket was too tight.

In some significant ways then, *Bastard Boys*' representation is a departure from the actual historical events. Indeed, this charge could be levelled at the series as a whole, as it selects events, represents actions otherwise undertaken by multiple people as undertaken by individuals, and puts imagined dialogue into the mouths of real-life figures such as Minister for Industrial Relations Peter Reith (Mike Bishop), Patrick's managing director Chris Corrigan (Geoff Morell), ACTU assistant secretary Greg Combet (Daniel Frederiksen), QC Julian Burnside (Rhys Muldoon) and solicitor Josh Bornstein (Justin Smith). Indeed it also selects and compresses events so that they form a compelling narrative, told over four hours, from the respective viewpoints of four characters. What, we might then ask, is *Bastard Boys*' responsibility to historical truth, and, indeed, what is any cultural or artistic text's responsibility?

The first point we might make here is that no piece of film, television or literature ever represents a historical moment accurately. It is not, and cannot be, a perfect or pho-



tographic reproduction – it can only ever be mimetic, that is, have the appearance of reality. Such a reproduction of the night of the 'peaceful assembly', for example, would have exactly the same number of people, making exactly the same movements, saying exactly the same things, in exactly the same conditions (time, weather etc.). In other words, 'realism' has always involved not exact reproduction, but a selection, compression and distillation of the events and characters which, in the eyes of the writer or director, best express the social 'truth' of the situation. In the view of someone like the great theorist of realism Georg Lukács, by choosing characters that are 'typical' – that at one and the same time are representatives of social groups or dynamics, and yet are nevertheless richly individualized – the individual and the social are able to be represented together. With these 'typical' individuals taken together, the entire picture of the piece might be able to represent the complex totality of society, its many dynamics and relations, and allow us to understand the inner structure of those dynamics and relations.¹



Bastard Boys and structure

It would be impossible here to note all the ways in which *Bastard Boys* makes these representations. It's enough to say that the basic sequence of events – industrial, political and legal – is recounted with some fidelity: a conspiracy to train a non-union workforce in Dubai is uncovered, the industrial action at the docks develops, two thousand dock workers are sacked, a non-union workforce is brought in to perform the work, the strike develops into a picket ('peaceful assembly'), a legal case of 'conspiracy' is brought against Patrick Stevedores. Finally, a compromise deal is made by the Union leadership and Patrick for a large number of redundancies, while the docks remain 100 per cent unionized.

It is worthwhile to muse upon certain key decisions made in telling this sequence of events. The miniseries chooses, first-

ly, to represent the events of the MUA dispute with Patrick and the federal government by selecting four point-of-view characters. Each character's story is told over a one-hour episode. In order, the characters are the ACTU's Combet, solicitor representing the MUA Josh Bornstein, the fictional MUA organizer Sean McSwain, and Patrick's Corrigan. The point-of-view changes are not strict: that is, though an episode concentrates on one particular character's story, it does not concentrate *solely* on that character. Each of the character's stories also develops over the four episodes. The second

important decision made here is for the four stories to be told sequentially, that is, there is no doubling back in time, but rather the historical sequence of events is told over time with a shift in point-of-view emphasis.

The fact that the series concentrates primarily on the unionist side of the struggle (three of the four characters) does not *necessarily* imply political support for the unions. Rather, it is the fact that these three are *sympathetic* characters, and that they are the first three stories in the four-part sequence, that gives the series a pro-union emphasis. Yet two



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things also undercut this pro-unionism. First, the last episode concentrates on Chris Corrigan, and in this final episode his character is also portrayed sympathetically. Point-of-view shifts like this work to change the expectations of the viewer. Where once you don't

understand the complexity of a character's motivations or background, suddenly these become clear to you and your entire perception of events shifts – everything is seen in a new light. (A famous literary example of this is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, where the reader is shown Darcy's point of view in the first few chapters and then not again until the latter half of the book.) The final episode centering on Corrigan certainly helps to present him more sympathetically, not least because he has some wonderful lines.

The choice of three pro-unionists/one anti-unionist also serves to shift the emphasis away from the federal government, deemphasizing their role in the dispute. It would, surely, have made sense for one of the characters to be Peter Reith? I recall Reith's increasingly desperate-looking face on television during those days, as he realized

the battle over public support was being won by the unionists. (This may have been either after 17 April or after the Supreme Court of Victoria's decision in favour of the unionists against Patrick Stevedores.) In my recollections – and I'm happy here to accept that they are incomplete – Reith was as much a face of the anti-union forces as Corrigan.

The devil in the details?

Having said all that, it is undoubtedly true that *Bastard Boys* also attributes certain decisions to people who did not necessarily make them, compresses events which were otherwise separate and omits other people who played important roles in the dispute. Greg Combet is represented as the strategic mind of the union movement, and Josh Bornstein as the instigator of the conspiracy case. Neither of these is strictly true. Bill Kelty has essentially been written out of the dispute, which is presented as the defining moment in Combet's rise to ACTU secretary, as his baptism of fire, so to speak. Kelty apparently threatened legal action over the way he was represented in *Bastard Boys*, while Bornstein and Coombs have both expressed their disappointment in the account.² Kelty has emphasized his role in the dispute, noting for example that 'I ran the ACTU meet-

ings, not Greg Combet' as represented in the series.³ In these portrayals, the pressure of the narrative – of art-form – can be seen. Traditionally, the narrative seeks to develop characters over time. So the artistic pressures to make these changes are obvious: to give an accurate representation, a one-to-one mapping of the events, would be to fragment that narrative, to introduce a whole host of secondary characters, to destroy character development. It would be to make the series into a documentary, to make art into history. Much more sound, from a narrative sense, is to select several characters as 'representatives' of a larger social process and if necessary attribute key decisions to them, which allows the events to be dramatized and results in that particular combination of idea and emotion necessary to art. ABC's head of drama Miranda Dear responded to the criticisms by noting exactly this: '*Bastard Boys* was conceived, written and funded as a drama, not a documentary or a docu-drama. It is part of the ABC's charter to reflect Australian social, cultural and political life and we believe *Bastard Boys* has achieved this.'⁴

And the question remains: does this historical rewriting really matter? Yes, no doubt some players involved are offended by their exclusion and others are possibly delighted by their centrality. But to criticize the series on these grounds is to misunderstand its nature, to view it as documentary and history, not as narrative or art. Here we would do well to remember, as I pointed out earlier, that realism *always* involves such selections, compressions, and omissions. The real question is whether, in Lukács' terms, the characters portrayed are 'typical', whether the decisions made – the four points of view, the central characters, the specific events related – represent the complex social relations of Australian society, whether *Bastard Boys* is able to delve beneath the surface of 'appearances' and to the 'essence' of what occurred. For Lukács, the great realist texts are able to show an understanding of what he calls the 'world-historical' forces. That is, to show an underlying understanding of the main trends and dynamics of society. And your answer to whether *Bastard Boys* is able to do this probably depends on your political outlook, which might explain Chris Corrigan's claim that the series was 'a boring tale of class warfare'.⁵ Does the MUA struggle represent an impor-

tant tension within today's society? Does it say something about the dynamics of contemporary Australia? Is it a dispute of social importance and are we likely to see its kind again?

A contemporary tale: neo-liberalism and the future

Despite Corrigan's dismissal of the series, *Bastard Boys* does represent with verisimilitude a particular and contemporary moment in Australian history. John Coombs as an aging unionist, eager to defend a declining workforce, Chris Corrigan as the instigator of a new non-union workplace, Josh Bornstein as a solicitor brought in an age of increasing 'legalization' of disputes – these three characters certainly qualify as 'typical'. They are representatives of one of the defining economic shifts of the last thirty years. What is at stake for these characters, on a political and personal level, is the neo-liberal vision for the future. For the neo-liberal program, unions are simply aging relics from a bygone era, holding up economic development and progress with archaic work-practices and unfair privileges. The neo-liberal program, then, is to promote market and workplace 'flexibility' by the introduction, among other things, of individual contracts for workers and the development of 'flexible work-practices'. In the neo-liberal view, unions should be eliminated from such workplaces, and legislation should be introduced to ensure this (or at least limit the unions' power). To those who oppose the neo-liberal program, this is essentially an attempt by rapacious big-business to increase its ability to make profits at the expense of its workers. Methods of resistance to neo-liberalism might include legal means or industrial struggles such as pickets. These issues underpin *Bastard Boys* and are embodied, in their own ways, in the figures of Coombs, Corrigan and Bornstein. Sean McSwain in some ways represents a less typical character of modern times, the young Left unionist, while the character of John Tully (Jack Thompson) expresses the tensions between the union leadership and its membership and the correlative tension between militant industrial action and courtroom legal strategies.

Perhaps the one significant criticism of *Bastard Boys* is this: the dispute was most likely won not by the legal tactics but the suc-

cess of the unbreakable picket line down on Swanston Dock. It was the decision of the MUA and the 'wharfies' to resort to 'old-school' industrial tactics that forced the issue into the public domain (causing a widespread and vigorous debate), which broke the new industrial relations laws introduced by the Liberal Government, and which over time swung public opinion behind the MUA. In this sense, *Bastard Boys* shifts the focus of debate away from the critically important one: the decision to convert the protest from a passive acceptance of the new situation into an active picket line halting work on the docks. This decision is poorly portrayed in the series and could be considered a major error of focus. It is the kind of decision that is raised consistently in union disputes under the Liberal Government's current industrial relations laws, and will be in the future.

Having made this criticism, nevertheless, *Bastard Boys* explores many of the important issues of the dispute effectively; that it does so with sympathy to all involved is an impressive achievement. Writer Sue Smith's script is tightly written, compelling, able to include family relations, and is at times very funny. (As noted, Chris Corrigan seems to have the best lines, and the scene in the final episode where he confronts the 'bankers' is wonderful.) The directing and acting is overwhelmingly strong. It's the sort of mini-series that the British have tended to do well (think of *A Very British Coup* [Mick Jackson, 1988], for example), and is reminiscent of something like *Waterfront* (Chris Thompson, 1984). It's the sort of series that we can only hope Australian television is able to continue to produce. •

Endnotes

¹ This is, in essence, the position of Georg Lukács in his books *The Historical Novel*, Merlin Press, London, 1962 and *Studies in European Realism*, Hillway Publishing Company, London, 1950.

² See 'Reloading History' in *The Age*, 16 May 2007, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/in-depth/reloading-history/2007/05/15/1178995153200.html> Accessed 4 July 2007.

³ See 'Reloading History' in *The Age*, 16 May 2007, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/in-depth/reloading-history/2007/05/15/1178995153200.html> Accessed 4 July 2007.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*