

15 July 2008

To EVERYONE It May Concern:

I am the director of a small talent agency, the Sydney Talent Company, which has been in operation since 1983. We have started and developed the careers of numerous successful Australian actors. This year we lost two of our young promising actors to the so-called major talent agencies. "So what?" you say, actors move from one agency to another as a matter of course. As a talent agent, director and actor, I have personally nurtured, trained, and guided these two actors for almost ten years. Then, one day, I get a visit or an email from them saying they have been asked to join a major agency. They are most thankful to me for all the years of help I have given them, but they feel they needed to go "to the next step."

To all the talent agencies' directors out there who know what I mean, I want to say that I am mad as hell, that this is "HIGHWAY ROBBERY," and there must be something we can do about this situation. The casting system is supposed to provide opportunities for all talented artists, but it is not working because it is running in favour of the minority of actors represented by the "majors."

When our actors move away from us to the "majors," I've discovered that many times they move sideways in their careers instead of upwards. I have seen my actors grow, I know what their strengths and weaknesses are, and I know what parts they are best suited for. They are growing actors, they are friends, and, in the case of the two actors who recently left my agency, there were "family."

To all the professional actors who are frustrated that you don't even get a chance to audition for a role you and your agent feels you are perfect for because **THE BRIEF WAS NOT MADE AVAILABLE TO AGENTS IN GENERAL**, I ask the question, "Is the current system fair? Over 95 percent of our actors are not working in the acting industry. Less than 5 percent is working. Most of this 5 percent are most probably the actors the major agencies are keeping employed at the expense of the 95 percent not being employed. This vast majority is not even being considered for any acting role or for very few acting opportunities at best. "Is it a healthy system under which our industry can grow and prosper?"

Even though I am the first to admit that there is no equity in life, especially in the entertainment industry, I think there are ways to make the playing field fairer for all talent agencies and professional actors. I am not going to moan and groan any more, and say, "That's the way it is." I propose that the entertainment industry move "to the next step" in providing a "fair go" for all professional actors. Suggestions include the following:

1. Casting briefs for feature films, TV projects, stage productions and TV commercials should be made available to all talent agencies within the city where the casting is to be held. Way too often we don't receive the full briefs for major films or TV series castings; we only receive the "left over roles" to suggest for.

2. All professional actors (MEAA members) should have the right to audition for all major roles in a feature film, TV series, stage work or TV commercial. For each project, each talent agency should be entitled to **SUBMIT AT LEAST ONE ACTOR FOR A LEADING ROLE IN THE PROJECT, AND THIS ACTOR MUST BE AUDITIONED EQUALLY ALONG WITH ALL OTHER ACTORS CONSIDERED FOR THE PROJECT**. This proposal should apply especially to feature films, TV series and stage work. Most casting directors of TV commercials already see many actors from most talent agencies.

3. All major governmental arts funding agencies/departments should insist that as a prerequisite for funding of any project, **CASTING OPPORTUNITIES MUST BE PROVIDED TO ALL TALENT AGENCIES AND TO ALL MEAA MEMBER ACTORS** in the city or state where casting is to be held.

4. Our industry should move towards "colour blind casting." We are about 20 years behind the USA in the portrayal of how a culturally diverse modern society has become. Our major Australian TV series, TV shows and feature films still portray an overwhelmingly monoculture society. For example, is it possible to cast an Asian, an African, a South American or any other non-anglo actor as just a regular character on Home and Away or as a continuing doctor on All Saints? Too farfetched? The few roles the non-anglo actors do get are still "ethnic specific," meaning roles are still written according to ethnic stereotypes most of the time.

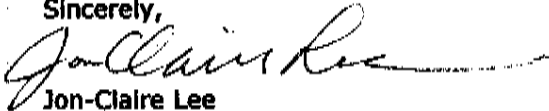
5. The implementation and the monitoring of the proposed fair casting practices within the entertainment industry should be the responsibility of a specific independent government body, or should be the responsibility of governmental funding bodies working in conjunction with the MEAA. An entertainment industry "ombudsman" may be necessary so that any individual or group working in the industry can present their complaints or grievances to a fair and impartial party who has the power to act on the concerns.

It is time for the Federal Government, the State Government, the Governmental Arts Funding Bodies, the actors' equity MEAA, the casting directors, the talent agencies and actors themselves get together to fight for a more equitable working environment for all involved in the entertainment industry. THE FACT THAT THE CASTING OF MAJOR FILM, TV AND STAGE PROEJCTS IS NOT OPEN AND TRANSPARENT, AND DOES NOT ALLOW THE OPPORTUNITY OF PARTICIPATION OF ALL PROFESSIONAL ACTORS IS NOT ACCEPTABLE. With positive changes to the way casting is done in Australia, I believe the result will be the infusion of more creative acting talent into the industry, the raising of the artistic standard in every media, and the creation of much more world-class Australian product for the local and international markets.

One of my favourite lines in film history is actor Peter Finch's line from the Paddy Chayefski 1976 feature film Network, in which his aging news presenter character Howard Beale is fed up with all the B.S. he has to spoon feed with a smile to the national audience every night. One rainy evening, he finally opens a window of his apartment and shouts to the world, 'I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore.' His cry of desperation became a national rallying call for action.

I look forward to your responses and suggestions on positive action to bring more equality to the casting process in the Australian entertainment industry.

Sincerely,



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Mr. Frank Sartor MP (Minister for the Arts)
Mr. Barry O' Farrell MPMs. Jullian Skinner MP (Shadow Minister for the Arts)
Mr. James Strong AO (Chairman, Australia Council for the Arts)
Ms. Kathy Keele (Chief Executive Officer, Australia Council for the Arts)
Mr. Ben Stout (Executive Officer, Arts Funding, Australia Council for the Arts)
Mr. Glen Boreham (Chairman, Screen Australia)
Mr. Christopher Warren (Federal Secretary, MEAA)
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