Xenophobia: The Great Local Content Myths

R.J. Stove

Recent agitation by Australian media pressure groups over New Zealand content on our TV screens represents a mish-mash of rancorous chauvinism, historical ignorance and double standards.

The scene: Jacobean England, circa 1610. The place: Ye Olde Worlde Star Chamber, where Ye Olde Worlde Luvvie Lobby Groups are once again in session. The defendant: one William Shakespeare, actor, former poacher, and dramatist, who has been summoned to answer the charges of infringing local content regulations in play after play. Instead of doing the decent thing and sticking to portrayals of the authentic English National Identity, he ransacks writings from Saxo Grammaticus (the 12th-century Danish author who dreamed up Hamlet’s storyline), Matteo Bandello (the 16th-century Italian responsible for Rome and Juliet), Scottish chroniclers (who gave him the idea for Macbeth), Greek chroniclers (Pericles, Timon of Athens), and even, horror of horrors, France (Joan of Arc swashbuckles onstage in Henry VI Part I, where—to add to Shakespeare’s ‘elitist’ sins—she’s referred to by her French name of La Pucelle). Incapable of denying these indictments, the Swan of Avon pleads guilty and is sentenced to silence the next 592 episodes of that classic Jacobean soap, Ye Olde Worlde EastEnders.

Does this scenario strike you as far-fetched? It shouldn’t. It’s no different in principle from, and all too similar in fine detail to, the antics of Australia’s True Blue media lobby group. True Blue has been incensed by the High Court’s judgement on 28 April, which found that Australia’s obligations under the 1988 Closer Economic Relations agreement with New Zealand must take precedence over the Australian Broadcasting Services Act’s local content requirements.

Certainly True Blue is running scared, as only a special interest group can—True Blue being an amalgam of the Australian Writers’ Guild (which covers authors for TV and the movies), the Screen Producers’ Association of Australia (SPA,A), the Music Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), the Australian Film Finance Corporation and the Australian Film Commission. From its plenipotentiaries’ rage at the High Court’s pronouncement, you’d think that the judges involved had advocated paedophilia or something. (On reflection, you wouldn’t: paedophilia advocacy would have been much better received in luvvie milieux.)

The MEAA’s representative, actor [sic] Sonia Todd, proclaimed the arrival of ‘a black day for the Australian television industry.’ True Blue as a whole described the judges’ decision as ‘a dis-
history, our traditions,' that he treats us to more cant about 'our culture,' and that one of the inventions that we needed was the invention of the 'wrong' tribe.

There are (ahem) unfortunate 20th-century examples of the kind that no Russian could replicate. Did all this make Grieg and Tolstoy treasonous? Perhaps True Blue would admit that it did. It’s hard to imagine nationalistic sentiments (with single-issue lobbyists, anything seems possible.

A nything except logic and historical literacy. True Blue wails about Triffid-like invasions of Kiwi product upon our television screens but it has no qualms whatsoever about facilitating invasions of Australian product upon television screens abroad. (Shades of the US Republican Party’s economic doctrine, as noted by British historian Timothy Garton-Ash: an unfettered free market in which, somehow, every A merican enterprise gets protected.)

A dditionally, sneers by the nation which produces Home and Away at the nation which produces Xena are not just dishonest— it’s a fair bet that True Blue operates, for all their nationalist bluster in public, faithfully consumed in private every episode of Seinfeld—but artistically dubious. Wh ile Xena might not be the 20th century’s most edifying creation, it is never the rubbish which so many pseud

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New South Wales, Victoria, etc., as part of the Commonwealth (see Section 6). Evidently Tom Jeffrey hasn’t. Perhaps the A NZ Bank’s existence furnishes an equal affront to his rancorously chauvinistic sentiments. With single-issue lobbyists, anything seems possible.

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and even non-pseudos like M Cguinness) assert. Xena’s playfully affectionate treatment of legend rests in the honoured tradition of T. H. W hite’s The Sword in the Stone. Its dialogue, like W hite’s, sometimes rises to genuine wit (‘I said no copying, Xerox!’). Its per odic hokum is not only deliberate but enjoyable. A nd in its harmless, interminently silly but commendably tactful way, it bears messages we can do with hearing afresh: that courage is A Good Thing; that not all the sociologists affixed to all the world’s bureaucratic teats can abolish evil; that— to quote Damon Runyon—the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but that is where the smart money is. Compare these implications with the Weltanschauing of South Park—which could be called bastardized N orman M ailer did it not more closely resemble a doodle-pad belonging to Charles M anson.

Yet Xena could be the vilest bilge ever to assail TV-addicted eyes, and still True Blue’s performance would be unjustified. One of art’s central truths—if we jib at deeming TV ‘art,’ it isn’t particularly clear what else we can deem TV at its best—is this: that no great artists seek to protect his art through any nationalistic cordon sanitaire. First-rate artists, and most second-rate artists, simply don’t work that way. However patriotic their philosophies (and no more impassioned patriots than G rieg, Sibelius, Smetana, T olstoy or Dostoievsky have ever existed, outside lunatic asylums), their mental antennae are so sensitive to their cultural environments that they freely acknowledge precursors whom they admire, whatever those precursors’ habitat. G rieg, whose whole creative life was a hymn— implicitly anti-German at that—to N orway, studied in Germany and revered the great German composers. T olstoy found Dickens and Carlyle literary pleasures which were pre-Blair and pre-Clinton. But evidently Tom Jeffrey hasn’t. Perhaps True Blue would admit that it did. It’s hard to imagine nationalistic sentiments (with single-issue lobbyists, anything seems possible.)

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weak. Almost every great artist has been a cosmopolitan, if not in behaviour, then in thought: even, or rather especially, when he has also loved his homeland. Handel, that epitome of Saxon beefiness and English stateliness, spent his formative years in Italy and wrote most of his operas to Italian words. Milton, far from being parochial in his puritanism, rejoiced in his Italian literary forebears. Dr Johnson was entirely conversant in Italian and French. These three could no more have pleased True Blue than Shakespeare could have done.

It was, however, left to a figure of our own century, Richard Strauss, to provide the wittiest and shrewdest refutation of ‘local content’ bully-boys, wherever they manifest themselves. He did so while assuring his librettist friend Stefan Zweig, a Jew, that he shared Zweig’s contempt towards Nazi artistic nationalism. ‘For me,’ Strauss wrote, ‘there are only two types of people, those who have talent and those who haven’t... It’s all one to me if they come from China, Upper Bavaria, New Zealand or Berlin. Provided,’ he could not resist adding, ‘that they’ve paid full price at the box office.’ Such a remark emphasizes anew how long and dusty a road True Blue’s functionaries must travel before attaining comparable creative insight. Meanwhile, they might at least stop pretending that wharfie-like job-preservation rots denote aesthetic virtue. They might even let the rest of us watch Xenia in peace.

NOTES
3 Burke, op. cit.

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