

“We’re living in strange times”

Marking Time scriptwriter speaks with WSWWS

Richard Phillips
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John Doyle, scriptwriter of Marking Time, a recent Australian television mini-series, spoke with the World Socialist Web Site early this week. Marking Time, Doyle’s second television drama, is about a 19-year-old Australian youth who meets and falls in love with an Afghan refugee on a temporary protection visa. (See: “Love and anti-refugee racism in rural Australia”)

Best known to Australian television viewers as Rampaging Roy Slaven, a satirist/sport commentator, Doyle was born in Lithgow and began his career as a teacher. He left teaching to become an actor with the Hunter Valley Theatre Company in the early 1980s and later teamed up with Greig Pickhaver (aka H.G. Nelson). The comic duo hosted several television and radio sports shows before gaining international prominence through The Dream, a nightly television commentary on the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000.

Richard Phillips: I thought *Marking Times* was very objective and humane. Could you explain how the story originated?

John Doyle: There were a number of things. Like the many, which I think are a significant minority in this country, I was outraged at how the Howard government used wedge politics and so-called border protection during the election campaign of 2001.

We live in very Dickensian times. By that I mean that never has so much information been available and yet the stocks of ignorance are very great. There is such a collision of ideas, I suppose, and so I wanted to find a dramatic form to express and explore this.

Another factor was being in Salt Lake City during the 2002 Winter Olympics. Having lived through and commented on the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000 it was quite a contrast to witness firsthand the US Olympics. The whole place was in lockdown. There were heavily armed security forces on every street corner and there was a great deal of distrust and suspicion. At the same time, I became acutely conscious of the over-riding emphasis on religion in the US. It was like living in a theocracy.

Like many others, the increasing muddying of religion and politics, which plays right into the hands of the terrorist organisations, disturbs me. The US government, by presenting everything in religious terms encourages a hardening of attitudes and a deepening schism along religious lines. This is exactly what the terrorists want.

One of the important aspects of *Changi*, my first television script, was to celebrate the secular nature of the Australian

outlook. God has no part in *Changi*. In fact, the series is laced with sacrilege. Australian war prisoners were subjected to the most extreme measures during the Second World War, but at no time did they turn to god. They turned to themselves, which I thought was very healthy.

By contrast, *Marking Time* has god at the centre of the argument. Randa cannot conceive of anyone who does not believe in god. But for Hal and his father Geoff religion is not part of the equation. These were some of the factors that produced the story.

I was also lucky enough to come into contact with people living on temporary protection visas who had been welcomed into the community of Young on the southwest slopes of New South Wales. They were working at the local meatworks and I met them through two former mayors—Tony Hewson and Eric Smith—who represent two generations and political viewpoints in the Young area. This was terrific.

Finally, there was a conference that HREOC [Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission] held in January last year that I asked to attend. The stories that came from that event were quite compelling as well.

So, there were lots of balls in the air that I wanted to explore. But I was looking for a simple dramatic form and there can be nothing as simple as a love story between two innocent people from different parts of the world.

RP: *Marking Time* clearly delineates between the confusion and ignorance of Hal’s friends and the racist policies of the political establishment. Could you elaborate?

JD: The problems examined in *Marking Time* are everywhere. Boredom amongst post-adolescent youth is not limited to rural and regional Australia, but comes with the turf. You can be bored in New York as much as you can in Brackley, New South Wales. But when you have boredom and a moral vacuum, then it’s very easy to politically exploit this.

While the media should play a role in filling this vacuum with healthy ideas, the commercial press has difficulty with this. Uplifting the political and moral climate of the community doesn’t necessarily produce an improvement in the share price of the media company you’re working for. Fiduciary duty demands that the bottom line be the first thing addressed. If something sells, then its moral content is immaterial to shareholders.

I suppose this is blindingly obvious, but I wanted to show how

this impacted on people in Brackley.

RP: But the issue is not just boredom but how ignorance, backwardness and confusion are created by social inequality, limited education and lack of a decent future.

JD: That's true and it was important to give Hal's friends a real sense of humanity. We have some affection for Bullet and the others, despite what they've said and done. They're generally likeable people, but they're misguided and under different circumstances—if there were some bells of clarity being rung from above—they would be good, honest and decent people.

RP: The media presents a picture of mass support for the Howard government's scapegoating of refugees, particularly in rural areas. *Marking Time* demolishes this fiction.

JD: I tried to do this, although I'm not sure whether it was completely successful. One of the reasons I chose rural Australia, however, was not to make it a special example but because this setting allows the top and bottom of society to mix. The sort of interchange between characters in the series could never happen in a big city. There is no way Lucy Turnbull [Sydney mayor] would ever be one-on-one with someone like Hal.

People can get along if they are able to directly interact with each other. This was obviously one of the factors involved in the Tampa issue. The government was determined to prevent anyone getting close to the refugees—they made damned sure of this. This way they could dehumanise the refugees. They were not individuals, but an amorphous mass, a group of so-called queue jumpers.

This was absolutely conscious, as was the "children overboard" allegations against the refugees. Peter Reith [former Australian defence minister] knew this was a lie, as did the rest of the government, but it was used to demonise these unfortunate people.

RP: *Marking Time* is interesting because it explores the emotional impact of government policy on Hal and his father, as well as Randa.

JD: Yes, Hal comes to feel a stranger in his own country. His decision to leave Australia, however, to try and meet up with Randa, is important and provides a spark of hope that somehow he is going to change the situation.

RP: It's about two years since these events and the Howard government's uncritical participation in the Bush administration's so-called war against terrorism. Do you have any comment on this?

JD: I'm uncertain and perplexed about where this is all leading but I know that it's not good. The war against terrorism seems to be the new Cold War and, as always, human rights are the first to be thrown overboard.

What concerns me is that the war against terrorism can be dredged up whenever you like and for any purpose. A red alert can be issued any time and it wouldn't surprise me that in the weeks leading up to the elections, both here and the US next year, that red alerts are issued to boost electoral chances.

What is needed is a strong opposition. Unfortunately, I don't see any sight of it in this country. Don't get me wrong, I don't have any barrow to push for the ALP, but I have no idea what the Labor Party's strategy is supposed to be.

The Howard government seems to have gone back to the 1950s

and the Labor Party appears to be trying to fight them on this ground. There is something Calwellian [Arthur Calwell, ALP leader from 1960-67] about Simon Crean.

At the same time, Kim Beazley [former ALP leader] is stronger on border protection than Howard. Maybe he should be standing at Melville Island with a kalashnikov or something over his shoulder defending the nation or suggesting that navy boats carry mines or TNT to blow refugee boats out of the water. It's all rather bizarre and worrying. In any case, Labor's response has helped create this very unhealthy atmosphere.

RP: You mentioned in one interview that genuine democracy requires accurate and truthful information.

JD: I do believe that. However, I also fear that it could be somewhat utopian because I don't know if it can ever be fully established. But as Geoff says in the series, all you can do is argue your case at every opportunity. And I suppose that's what I'm trying to do.

RP: What has been the response to *Marking Time*? Has there been any reaction from government quarters?

JD: I've had no response from government circles and there was no attempt to make me tone things down. This baffles me a little, given their campaign against the ABC. The only thing I couldn't use in the series was a Liberal Party television commercial that said, "We decide who comes into the country". But we used a Liberal election poster instead.

The public response has been good—mainly from people in the streets and some letters of encouragement. Not unexpectedly, there have been a couple of outraged letters but these were a minority. Ninety-eight percent of the comments have been very supportive.

RP: And your next project?

JD: To try and enjoy a quiet life for a little while I guess, and then look around for some other issues to explore. I don't think there's going to be any shortage—we're living in strange times.



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