



# Calling the shots

by Karl Quinn

*After conquering Australian TV, Daina Reid commutes to directing gigs, such as for *The Handmaid's Tale* in Toronto.*

It's lights, camera, action for Australian female directors in Hollywood, as television enjoys a new golden age.





**I**N JULY, Jessica Hobbs became the third female director in four years to make the giant leap from Australian television to a best director nomination at the Emmys. Her nod for the finale of *The Crown*'s third season follows previous nominations for Daina Reid (2019) and Kate Dennis (2017) for *The Handmaid's Tale*. It's a remarkable run that says as much about the shifting demographics of the industry as Hollywood's enduring love of Australian talent.

"It's very important for people to realise how far we've travelled," says Gillian Armstrong, who became the first female Australian director to tackle Hollywood when the major studios came courting after her debut feature, *My Brilliant Career*, wowed Cannes and the New York Film Festival in 1979. Even then, being Australian was no barrier to entry. "I used to say I could have been a green frog and they would have come after me," she says. "If you've made an award-winning film that's made money, looks expensive but costs nothing, they're after you."

But being a woman – well, that was a different matter. She might as well have been a green frog as far as some of the clueless male executives who tried to woo her were concerned. They certainly treated her like a different species. Armstrong recalls a breakfast meeting to which she invited her partner because she thought he'd enjoy seeing the swanky Polo Lounge in

Beverly Hills. "And this guy from the studio did the entire pitch to him," she recalls, still astonished decades later. "He could not look me in the eyes. 'We want you' – he's doing this begging pitch, but he could not do it to a young woman."

By the time Jocelyn Moorhouse was tempted over in 1994, things were improving. Steven Spielberg's company Amblin wanted to adapt the book *How to Make an American Quilt*, and the project's female producers insisted on a woman director. "My experience was pretty amazing," says Moorhouse, whose 1991 debut feature *Proof*, starring Hugo Weaving, Genevieve Picot and a young Russell Crowe, had caught Spielberg's eye. "I was fully supported by Amblin and my producers. It was a mostly male crew, however, and I think they thought I was a bit of a novelty."

To a degree, female directors still are. According to the latest USC Annenberg gender and diversity study, released in January, women directed just 12 of the top 100 movies at the North American box office in 2019. But that's more than double the 13-year average of 4.8 per cent, and by far the highest yet.

In TV, though, the dial has shifted in a major way. The Directors Guild of America reports that women directors have more than doubled their share of television episodes in just five years, accounting for 31 per cent last year. In part, that's because of the greater

number of drama and comedy shows, largely driven by streaming. But it's also due to the general push for stories, and the people who make them, to more accurately reflect society at large.

For former Sydneysider Kate Woods, who took the Hollywood plunge in 2009 and is widely regarded as the trailblazer among this cohort, it's not just a numbers game. "I do believe women's point of view is a little different, and that's why balance is important," she says. "In the end, everybody will tell a story differently, and that's why in all areas of work there should be diversity in the stories that we give back to society."

Woods has been there long enough to see the impact of streaming and cable television on the stories that get made and the place for women – and people from diverse backgrounds – to tell them. "When I first started here, there was talk about gender equality but it felt a little token," she says. "There were a couple of jobs I did where you really felt like they kinda had to bring you on, and they didn't feel comfortable about it. And sometimes that wasn't a great atmosphere to work in. But that's really changing."

And perhaps the clearest sign of that change is that an Australian woman, Cate Shortland, has directed a Marvel movie, *Black Widow* (due to open here next year). In modern-day Hollywood, ticks of approval don't come much bigger than that.





Daina Reid, here directing a scene from *The Handmaid's Tale*, believes there are opportunities to return from overseas work and tell stories using the Australian landscape as backdrop.

## Daina Reid

THE SCREEN got its hooks into Daina Reid early – the only question was which side of the camera would she be on. “I went to see *Star Wars* when I was 10 and I pretty much knew what I wanted to do,” says the Emmy-nominated director of *The Handmaid's Tale*. “I wanted to do that.”

But she'd caught the performing bug, too. From the age of five she and her sister Kendra had attended dance classes in suburban Perth, and by 13 the pair were regulars on the *Young Talent Time* knock-off *Stars of the Future*. Being inside a television studio “piqued my interest” in how it all worked, says Reid, whose laconic manner and easy laugh make her one of the less intimidating characters to sit in a director's chair. Her work experience at Seven led to a degree in film and television production, where she was told, “If you want to be a director, go off and do acting classes.”

“So I did, and I met Judith Lucy and Frances O'Connor – they're still my friends today – and they auditioned for the drama school [West Australian Academy of Performing Arts], so I did as well, and I got in, so I went.”

After graduating she found her way to *Jimeoin* and then the sketch-comedy show *Full Frontal*, where Shaun Micallef also cut his teeth. “But when that finished I thought, ‘Right, that's me done; I'm getting back on track.’” Next to her *Full Frontal* dressing room in Melbourne was the edit suite for *Blue Heelers*. “So I walked in and said, ‘I hear you do directors' attachments.’ They went, ‘Yep.’ I went, ‘I want to do one.’ They said, ‘See you on Monday.’”

That was in 2000 and, over the years that followed, Reid worked hard to learn the craft of episodic television. *Heelers* was followed by *The Secret Life of Us* and *MDA*. After a decade behind the camera she was at the helm of significant series and miniseries across all the Australian networks: *Paper Giants* and *Howzat!* *Kerry Packer's War* for Nine; *Offspring* for Ten; *Never Tear Us Apart: The Untold Story of INXS* for Seven; *The Secret River* for the ABC; *Sunshine* for SBS. By 2016, she had done pretty much everything you could do in local scripted television.

“That was fantastic,” Reid thought, “but what do I want to do next? How do I push forward?” The obvious answer was Hollywood,

where her friend Kate Dennis had relocated a few years earlier: “I think I need to give it a crack.”

Husband Tim, a horticulturalist, and their two teenage kids were all in favour of it, but Reid was cautious. Courtesy of Dennis, she'd already seen that family life for a Hollywood director only happens between jobs because so much TV is now shot outside Los Angeles – especially in Toronto and Vancouver in Canada, and Georgia and New Mexico in the US. “I'd be staying at her house but she would never be there because she'd be in a different place.” Reid figured she'd see her family just as often by commuting from Australia, and without the upheaval to everyone else's life. Still, “It was horrifying the first time, to actually go away from your family for 10 weeks.”

Life on set – especially on episodes of *The Handmaid's Tale* filmed in Toronto during winter – is far from glamorous. “You do your work at the apartment [rented for the duration of production], then you go to work [on set], and then you go back to your apartment,” she says. “It's a really lonely existence.”

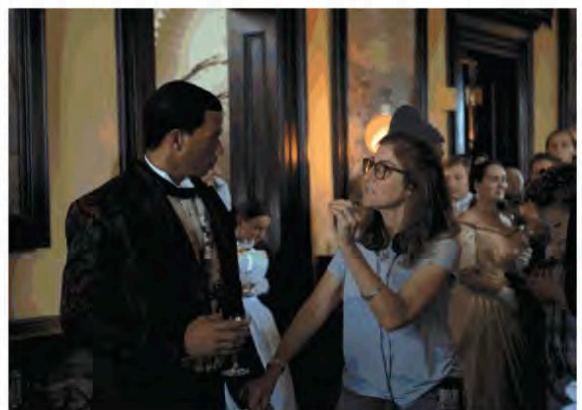
The shows have been great – *The Outsider* with Ben Mendelsohn for HBO, the Greg (*Parks and Recreation*) Daniels comedies *Space Force* for Netflix and *Upload* for Amazon – but Reid isn't sure she wants to rush back, at least not until everything finds a safe and familiar rhythm post-COVID. “I don't particularly want to be on the front line.”

Besides, she's hoping the content explosion driven by the rise of streaming might begin to pay dividends closer to home. “I know that when I'm watching Scandi noir, for example, I'm watching it because it's a great crime story but also because I want to see the Nordic fiords.”

The Australian landscape offers a similarly enticing point of difference, Reid believes, that ought to be eminently sellable around the world, if coupled with the right stories. “My hope is you can go away and do something overseas and then come back and work here [to the same standard],” she says. “I'm sure all Australian directors want to be home.”

“You do your work at the apartment, then you go to work and then you go back to your apartment. It's a really lonely existence.”

Kate Woods, on the set of *Underground*, says the diversity of stories on streaming channels demands a range of different voices to tell them.



## Kate Woods

OVER A New York City lunch in 2005, Kate Woods was asked by Anthony LaPaglia, who had acted in her 2000 film *Looking for Alibrandi* before becoming a major star on American TV, how things were going back home. “Ups and downs,” she replied. There and then, she recalls, “He picked up the phone and called his producer and said, ‘I've got a director sitting in front of me you're putting on the show.’” And with that she had a gig on LaPaglia's FBI procedural *Without a Trace*, one of the top-rating shows in the US at the time, with an audience that regularly topped 20 million viewers.

Woods had cut her teeth in the ABC's drama department where she was one of the few women directing on some of the most revered shows of the 1990s and early 2000s: *G.P.*, *Correlli*, *Phoenix*, *MDA*. After deciding to try her luck in the big leagues, she spent the first few years commuting back and forth between LA and Sydney, before buying a one-way ticket in 2009 and going all-in on the Hollywood adventure.

It was a fruitful move. In her busiest 12 months she shot 11 episodes, everything from *Bones* to *Nashville* to *NCIS: Los Angeles*. The workload, she says, “was crazy”. Now, with shorter-run shows for the cable and streaming platforms dominating, it's more likely to be five or six episodes a year. Her most recent gigs include four of the 10 episodes in the Netflix series *Messiah*, an episode of *Home Before Dark* (for Apple TV+) and one episode of Ethan Hawke's abolitionist drama

*The Good Lord Bird*.

Woods's partner is an architect – not in the industry, which is good, but still able to get it, which is great. “It's a similar job in a way,” she says. “You're like the conductor of an orchestra, you have the concepts rather than the nitty-gritty of doing the work.”

The shift of audiences for drama away from broadcast television towards the streamers and cable services has been a clear driver of diversity in the industry.

“The stories that are being told now are so different that you really need different kinds of voices to tell them,” Woods says. “There are going to be stories that are better told by a man, or better told by a woman, and that's fine, but I don't really think that there's discrimination any more.”





For Catriona McKenzie, pictured on the set of *Sabrina*, telling Indigenous stories is vital to making Australia whole.

## Catriona McKenzie

WHEN CATRIONA McKenzie discovered in her late teens that her birth father was Indigenous and her mother was white, it was, she says, “a lot of information to take in”. She’d had a happy and loving childhood as the adopted daughter of a Scottish academic and his wife, and they were totally supportive of her desire to connect with her birth parents, but in doing so something in her shifted.

“I wouldn’t say I was emotionally constipated,” reflects McKenzie, currently in Montreal with her 11-year-old son Callum after a stretch in LA, “but it’s certainly quite intense meeting your biological family from two very different socioeconomic and cultural places, and then having to incorporate that.”

As she travelled on her road to self-discovery, McKenzie enrolled in Indigenous studies, began a PhD in social sciences and then ditched it to start a circus performance group. She began writing, went to film school, and made a short film for the *Festival of Dreaming* in the lead-up to the Sydney Olympics. “I was suddenly a director,” she says. “I had no idea what I was doing, but I found I could take everything I knew from being an academic [and apply it] to telling something more vital that can have a bigger impact on a wider audience.”

She went to New York to study filmmaking. On her return she threw herself into the local industry, working regularly by her mid-30s, and had directed a feature, *Satellite Boy*, by 40.

Two years ago, she decided to dip her toes in the big pond of Hollywood, where she directed

episodes of *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Riverdale* and the final season of *Supernatural* (on which, she proudly notes, she is one of just four women to have directed across its 15 years and 327 episodes). Next up is *The Republic of Sarah*, for TV network The CW (home of *Supernatural*, *Riverdale* and *The Flash*) on which she’s the producing director. “That means that I’ll direct three or four episodes and produce the rest. It feels great to be able to hire diverse female directors. Walking the talk.”

For McKenzie, it’s more than just a job. “I have a platform, I really want to tell important stories. I want to get these messages out there.” She has a couple of Australian features in development, including a stolen generations story with a twist and *Pemulwuy*, about the Aboriginal warrior who offered stern resistance to early white settlers, produced by Phillip Noyce and Stan Grant. “All that stuff that was quite painful and difficult and challenging back in the day has now brought me to a point where I’m ready to do some exciting things,” she says. “I really want to tell Indigenous stories, genre stories, to a wider audience.”

Occasionally on a film set you will hear someone mutter “we’re not curing cancer” when a decision is taking longer than they think it should. But, McKenzie says, “I think actually we *are* curing cancer. It’s a cultural cancer that we have to just push out the door. We have to make space for all these stories. We’re not whole as a nation in Australia until we can tell these stories.”

## Jet Wilkinson

IN AUSTRALIA, Jet Wilkinson sometimes found her experience directing shows such as *Neighbours*, *Home and Away* and *All Saints* working against her. “It didn’t feel like it was considered cool enough, so it was hard for me to break into a certain echelon,” she says from LA, where she is spending lockdown with her wife and their baby.

But since moving to America in 2015, she has worn her soapie years as a badge of honour. “I always tell people that’s where I come from, because they want to know you can shoot to a schedule, even on huge American budgets,” she says. “They want to know you have a vision, a plan, and you can execute that plan. And I always assure them I can because I’ve come from Australian TV, where it’s a shoestring budget and we do really good stuff.”

Born in Vietnam in 1974 and orphaned during the war, Wilkinson was adopted by white parents in Sydney. Her childhood was largely free of racism, and she grew up believing hard work would lead to success. “I went out into the world not even realising that I had all these checkboxes that I did or didn’t fill,” she says.

She has no doubt, though, that some of her success in LA is due to the push for greater diversity in the industry: “It was like the minute I walked through the door I ticked all the boxes.” Still, it has sometimes felt about box-ticking rather than any desire to change what was on screen. She recalls a casting session from her early days there, where the script notes described a character as Ivy League, all-American, and with a bright future. “And they said, ‘So it’s gonna be white.’” She pushed back, and though she didn’t win that one, the experience gave her a clear sense of what was at stake. “I want you to represent all walks of life,” she says. “So now I try to choose projects where I can reflect that or where I can inject that.”

Wilkinson has episodes of 16 US shows to her name, including *How to Get Away with Murder* (set in a law firm owned by a strong black woman) and *The Chi* (about teen life in a black neighbourhood of Chicago). Fittingly, given her soapie background, she directed the *Home* episode of Hilary Swank’s Netflix space drama *Away*. Still, there’s only so much you can do when working on other people’s shows, which is why she is originating projects for screens big and small: “Something that I stand for. If I died the next day, at least I’d leave behind some kind of legacy, something I thought was important, that someone might watch and say, ‘That’s going to change the way I view the world.’”

Jet Wilkinson, shown on the set of Netflix’s *Warrior Nun*, thinks her work on Aussie soapies with tiny budgets enhanced her appeal in L.A.







## Kate Dennis

**I**N PRIDE of place in Kate Dennis's home in the Melbourne suburb of Caulfield is an ornamental headdress of brightly coloured feathers, bought at a jungle market in Brazil when she was working on the 1991 feature film *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*. "It only took me about 25 years to get it framed," she says over coffee in the house to which she, her husband David, and their two teenage daughters recently returned after five years in L.A.

A tall, slender, fast-talking blonde, Dennis – who was Emmy nominated for an episode of *The Handmaid's Tale* in 2017 – spent parts of her childhood in the Philippines and the US because of her father's work with a chemical

*On the set of Tommy, one of the three shows Kate Dennis has "set up", granting her income for every episode that airs.*

company. As a result, she says, "I've always, to my detriment, had incredibly itchy feet". They've taken her to the Amazon, to the Swiss Alps (where she crewed on Sylvester Stallone's *Cliffhanger*), to Ireland (where she wrote a screenplay about lonely farmers looking for brides). They brought her home to Australia, where she landed her first directing job on legendary producer John Edwards' drama series *Big Sky*, which led to *The Secret Life of Us*, perhaps Australian television's greatest talent incubator. And then, with London calling, in 1997 they took her away again.

In the UK, Dennis got her first crack at the holy grail of TV directing: setting up a series from pilot, the BBC rom-com *Rescue Me*. "You do the initial casting, all the initial locations, you set up the look of the show. Obviously you're talking to the producer or showrunner about everything, you work together, but there are a lot of initial decisions to be made."

Not all pilots go to series, but if they do, the pay-off can be significant: "You get paid a portion of every episode that goes to air ad infinitum, for the course of the show." Set up a *Friends*, in other words, and you need never work again. Dennis has now set up three: CBS drama *Tommy*, the hospital drama *New Amsterdam* (now in its third season), and HBO's runaway-lovers-on-a-train show *Run*.

Not all of a director's work on high-end shows actually involves being on set, where they make hundreds of decisions every day – about lighting, camera angles, props, costume, line delivery, performance. (One thing the director almost never does, though, is call "cut": that's the role of the first assistant director.)

Typically, an hour of television might involve a nine-day shoot. But before the cameras roll, there's the prep period for rehearsal, script changes and logistical planning; when the cameras stop, there's post-production (editing, VFX, re-recording dialogue). All up, Dennis calculates, the on-set aspect makes up "about 40 per cent of a director's job". Doing a sought-after two-episode "block" of a show might mean being away for six weeks at a stretch. The days are long, too – up to 17 hours, including travel time to and from set – and weekends barely exist.

It can put an enormous strain on family life. Most of the 30 or so episodes Dennis has directed across 20 US shows have been shot far from LA, meaning she would be away for weeks, maybe months, at a time, while former barrister David stayed at home in the hip suburb of Studio City to play, as he puts it, "the 1950s housewife". And when she was at home, Dennis says, "I'd overcompensate. I'm exhausted, but I come back and I'm trying to do everything, I'm doing the lunches, I'm trying to be the super mum, and that carries on until I go away again."

"It's a lot, and it's the dream," she adds. "So you go through waves of thinking, 'Oh my god, I love this, I'm so happy', and waves of thinking, 'What the hell am I doing to my life?'"

Though it was driven by the kids, the move back to Australia has been a chance to find some balance. She has a deal with HBO that should see her able to keep working on Hollywood shows without having to live there. At least that was the plan, before COVID. "A year from now I could be saying, 'Oh god, worst decision of my life. I was on the incline, career-wise, and now I've totally plateaued.' I don't know."

DANIELA BISHAN

A co-production of Houston Grand Opera, Chicago Lyric Opera and Canadian Opera Company presented by Adelaide Festival in association with Adelaide Symphony Orchestra

# A Midsummer Night's Dream

AN OPERA BY BENJAMIN BRITTEN  
DIRECTED BY NEIL ARMFIELD

26 Feb - 3 Mar 2021

ADELAIDE FESTIVAL **AF**

"Inspired singing and  
hilarity ... a triumph"  
*Chicago Classical Review*

Made possible by the Adelaide Festival Chairman's Circle, the Adelaide Festival Opera Donor Circle (Leading Patron Maureen Wheeler AO) and MM Electrical

Pre-sale now for Friends of the Festival.  
All tickets on sale 19 November.

[adelaidefestival.com.au](http://adelaidefestival.com.au)





## Kitty Green

AS A filmmaker, Kitty Green owes her grandmothers a huge debt of gratitude. She has her father's mother to thank for her first camera. "She wanted to go on the pension and she had just a tiny bit too much money – she's dead now, so they can't arrest her," jokes Green in the small but elegant Sean Godsell-designed kitchen-living area of her parents' renovated workers' cottage in Melbourne's Carlton (a room only marginally smaller than her entire apartment in New York, where she has lived for three years). "So she gave each of us grandkids a tiny bit of money to do something with. And with my little lump I bought a video camera."

*Kitty Green's latest film, **The Assistant**, was modelled on the Harvey Weinstein saga.*

Green was 11 at the time, "and that's all I wanted, I was obsessed. A lot of my friends wanted to act in front of it, but I always wanted to be the one behind it. So I started making movies with fishing line and Barbie dolls and stuffed toys and things in the backyard."

Years later, the self-confessed science nerd was working as an assistant editor at the ABC. She'd been there six months when her boss offered some career advice. "Kitty, if you work really hard, you know, in 30 years you can still be here." And I was like, 'Oh god.' So I quit."

With her scant savings and her camera (no, not the same one), she headed to Ukraine, home of her maternal grandmother, to follow a group of female political activists she'd met on a previous trip. After 14 months in the company of Femen – best known for exposing their breasts in public – and their svengali-esque male manager, she had the makings of her first documentary, *Ukraine Is Not a Brothel*, which premiered at the Venice Film Festival in September 2013.

Her grandmother's homeland also inspired her next film, the short documentary *Casting Oksana Bayul*, which won a prize at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival in 2015. "When you win at Sundance everyone's very nice to you and you go, like, 'I have a career,'" she says. "But it never really goes bang."

From the outside, the explosion seemed to come when *Casting JonBenet*, her unconventional documentary about the disappearance of US child pageant queen JonBenet Ramsey, landed on Netflix in 2017. But while it looked expensive, the film was made for a pittance by Green and her small crew, who could only afford to rent the studio where it was shot on

"You go through waves of thinking, 'Oh my god, I love this, I'm so happy,' and thinking, 'What the hell am I doing to my life?'"

weekends. "We'd get the studio Friday night, we'd build the set all night, and the first interview subject would come in at 9am and we'd shoot all day. Then we'd build a new set all Saturday night and shoot the next day. On Monday we would just be wrecked."

Her most recent film, *The Assistant*, marks a change of direction, if not of budget. The critically acclaimed drama about a female staffer (Julia Garner, pictured left with Green) in the office of an entertainment mogul clearly modelled on Harvey Weinstein, was shot in just 18 days on a shoestring pulled so taut that "we don't have anything on the cutting-room floor; basically, everything we shot is in there".

That her work so far consists of small-scale, "women-centred stories" in part reflects the budgets available to her, but also what she wants to say. She hopes to one day get to play on a much broader canvas. "We don't want to be boxed in as the people telling female stories," she says of her generation of women filmmakers. "But at the same time, I do think we're bringing voices that weren't there before." ■



SENZAFINE NIGHT COLLECTION, DESIGN POLIFORM.

SAVE 20% ON KITCHENS, WARDROBES AND WALL SYSTEMS.  
ENDS 31 DECEMBER 2020.

# Poliform

Sydney | Melbourne  
poliformaustralia.com.au

POLIFORM.IT