

Casting director Jan Russ: From teenage mum to mother figure to the stars

Australian Story By Wendy Page

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Jan Russ is the silent operator credited with kick-starting the careers of many of the biggest names in the entertainment industry in Australia and around the world.

But now the star-maker has revealed a personal story with more twists and turns than any soap opera.

Her experiences shed light on an era that may sound like the Dark Ages, but the repercussions are still being felt in 2014.

Russ's story starts in 1965 with a teenage pregnancy and the forced surrender of her baby daughter.

"It was a terrible, terrible thing for a single girl to get pregnant. You were looked down on as if you were a third class citizen and you were a bad girl, a wanton girl," she said.

She says her then-boyfriend, the father of her baby girl, helped arrange her trip to Sydney so she could stay at an unmarried mothers' home.

"He put me on the train and stood while the train left. I always hoped that he would say 'don't go' ... but he didn't," she said.

"I live by that wonderful saying that I suppose comes from being in the theatre — 'the show must go on'," she said.

"And of all the sadness and the downtimes... I've had my son Sam, who is [and] has been an absolute joy to me."

Russ pursued a stage career before becoming the original casting director for *Neighbours*, a job she held for nearly 25 years.

She plucked Russell Crowe from the stage and gave him his first on-screen break.

She was also first to offer Hugh Jackman a screen role. And then there was Jason and Kylie and Delta Goodrem, along with Natalie Imbruglia, Liam Hemsworth, Guy Pearce and many others.

But while she warmly nurtured the young stars, nobody, not even close friends and family, knew about Russ's secret "torment and shame".

The not-so-swinging Sixties

The 1960s brought the Beatles, the Pill, and the summer of love, but in Australia there was still condemnation and stigma for young women who conceived outside marriage.

When she became pregnant after a single sexual encounter with her boyfriend, Russ fled her parents' house in Melbourne to seek a place in an unmarried mother's home in Sydney.

When there was no room she was taken in by a sympathetic older woman, Tessa Durston.



PHOTO: Jan Russ reveals a personal story with more twists and turns than any soap opera. (Australian Story)

MAP: Melbourne 3000

From Ramsay Street to superstardom



Which Australian actors found their start on *Neighbours* before going on to find worldwide success?

Mrs Durston subsequently offered to arrange a private adoption through friends.

Russ described the birth of her daughter in a hospital run by Catholic nuns as a terrifying, lonely and a Dickensian experience.

In the aftermath of the birth her parents unexpectedly reached out to her and she took the week-old baby home in the belief that she would be allowed to raise her.

It transpired that Russ's father hoped her older brother and his wife would adopt the child.

But it was not to be, and the next day Jan Russ's weeping brother was dispatched back to Sydney with the tiny baby wrapped in a shawl to hand her over to Tessa Durston so the private adoption could proceed.

Jan Russ got on with her life but she never forgot the daughter she had taken home for just one night.

She cut a picture out of a woman's magazine of a baby that resembled her daughter and carried it with her for many years. She still has the baby's hospital wrist tag.

Mother hen to the stars

Daniel MacPherson and Jason Donovan are among the actors with fond memories of Russ and her talents.

"I was 17. I'd never acted before. I didn't know what the heck I was doing, supposed to be finishing my high school degree and somehow I ended up on TV," MacPherson said.

"Jan was very much a mother figure to a very young cast."

MacPherson, who now co-hosts *Dancing With The Stars*, moved on from *Neighbours* to roles in British police drama *The Bill* and later to *City Homicide*.

Jason Donovan was cast alongside Kylie Minogue by Russ in *Neighbours* in 1986.

"Certainly she is responsible for the launching of a number of careers, not just in Australia, but in the world," Donovan said.

"Jan is someone who understands performers, who's had a performance background themselves.

"For Kylie and myself you can't buy the chemistry that a combination of people coming together can give out.

"It goes back to the casting. It's all about someone thinking that person might be able to work with someone else and I think that's where Jan's genius started.

"She's got this innate understanding of somebody who's going to become big."

Ian Smith, who Russ cast in the role of the popular character Harold Bishop, said "she picked the ones who had the ability to learn, who were serious about what they were doing, not just wanting to be a star".

Nine years ago Russ finally confessed her past to Smith after seeing his *Australian Story* program.

Smith had revealed his own experience of discovering at the age of 54 that he had been adopted.

Russ felt she could tell him her secret without fear of rejection.

"And we kept coming closer and closer. I needed help as well," Smith said.

In March last year then prime minister Julia Gillard issued a national apology "for the policies and practices that forced the separation of mothers from their babies, which created a lifelong legacy of a pain and suffering".

It was estimated that up to 150,000 women were involved in forced adoptions between 1951 and 1975.

Topics: arts-and-entertainment, television, adoption, human-interest, melbourne-3000

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