

Inserting Minority characters into a Majority World. Conversations between a screenwriter and script reader as they rewrite a colonial world

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Panel 14 – TV & ETHICS

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Abstract

Simulating the development process, Sheridan Humphreys and Rose Ferrell explore the challenges and experiences of creating a leading role for an actor who is not white in a largely globalized, white world. The research centres on a first draft screenplay for an historical drama in which the protagonist is an Aboriginal girl travelling between Australia and London in the 1830s. The paper connects theory with practice while it highlights issues to do with the representation (or lack of) Aboriginal people as protagonists in British colonial dramas. Moreover, it discusses screenwriting practice which is situated between and draws upon other disciplines: history, theatre studies and literary criticism, amongst others. Sheridan Humphreys, who is currently completing her doctorate on this topic at the Menzies Australia Institute in London, is the screenwriter. Rose Ferrell, whose research focus is screenwriter's voice and its creation through practice, is the script reader. Together, Sheridan and Rose discuss craft aspects of writing and reading a screenplay. Through an investigation of the screenwriter's voice, the *believability* of the main character becomes the benchmark and critical focus, leading to a discussion of the character's voice as differentiated from the screenwriter's own voice within the context of this first draft screenplay. The presentation raises issues around voice, authorship, representation and perceptions of character believability in the context of a world in which minority voices – particularly in historical eras – are largely absent. At its core, the paper seeks to shed light on the ethical concerns around portrayal of 'others' by majority writers in a world which, increasingly, recognizes the absence of those other voices, and the need to redress this imbalance.

Keywords – screenwriting, screenwriter's voice, creative practice, minority characters, historical dramas, ethics of screenwriting

Rose Ferrell (Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia) is an adjunct lecturer, screenwriting researcher and an independent screenwriter and filmmaker with three decades' experience as a technician and writer in drama, documentary and commercial production. Her specialist research is on the screenwriter's voice, particularly exploring the interrelationships between cultural inflection and voice in screenwriting creative practice. Her writings, which develop her framework for understanding the concept of voice through creative practice, have appeared in publications, including the Journal of Screenwriting and the Palgrave Handbook series. Rose currently lives in regional Western Australia where she continues to write long form screen drama alongside her research publications.

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Sheridan Humphreys (Menzies Australia Institute, Kings College London, UK) is an Australian creative writer and researcher who lives in Surrey, England. Her work includes plays and screenplays. At present she is a Lecturer in Screenwriting at the University of Greenwich and at Royal Holloway University of London and a PhD scholar in screenwriting research in the Department of English and Menzies Australia Institute at King's College London. Prior to academia she worked extensively in UK theatre publicity with companies including Paines Plough, Talawa, Tamasha and Candoco and at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Sheridan's current research interest is in leading roles in British Empire era historical drama for protagonists who are not white, how this differs from colour-blind casting, and how the stories we see on screen shape how we perceive our multicultural past. Sheridan blogs about Australian theatre in the UK and its relationship to our shared national narrative here, www.sheridanhumphreys.com.

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