

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Noeline Brown
1938 -
Actor

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 10 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: Noeline Brown

Director/Producer Rod Freedman

Executive Producer Mark Hamlyn

Duration 26 minutes **Year** 2005

Study guide prepared by Darren Smith © NFSA

Also in Series 10: Tom Bass, Sir Zelman Cowen, Anne Deveson,
Joan Kirner, Max Lake, Noel Tovey

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For more information about Film Australia's programs, contact:

National Film and Sound Archive of Australia

Sales and Distribution | PO Box 397 Pyrmont NSW 2009

T +61 2 8202 0144 | F +61 2 8202 0101

E: sales@nfsa.gov.au | www.nfsa.gov.au

SYNOPSIS

According to Noeline Brown, the trick to life is happiness.

Australia's much-loved queen of comedy was born a 'happy child in a happy house' in Sydney's inner west. Her family was working class, her father a 'union man', so it shouldn't have seemed so surprising when the approachable, down-to-earth showbusiness doyen decided to run for political office. She has twice stood as a Labor Party candidate for the NSW Senate, in 1999 and 2003.

But it is for her long and successful career in radio, television and theatre that Noeline is best known.

Her first job at 15 was in a library where, through colleagues, she was introduced to performing and began to learn her craft in revues and theatre restaurants.

In the 1960s, she featured in the phenomenally popular TV hit, **The Mavis Bramston Show**, which made her a household name but typecast her for many years as a brassy, brazen 'tart with or without a heart'. She went on to star in such memorable programs as **My Name's McGooley, What's Yours?**, **Blankety Blanks** and **The Naked Vicar Show**, although theatre remained her first love.

Married to writer/producer Tony Sattler, with whom she runs a production company, Noeline lives in the Southern Highlands and continues to write, act and do community work.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include Drama, English, Australian History, Politics and Vocational/Career Studies.

PERFORMANCE STUDIES

Playing a character

'Television's "ocker sheila"' is how one newspaper article in the program describes Noeline Brown. Noeline has been successful in achieving one of her intentions as an actor—to work in Australia and use the Australian accent in her work.

Many of the characters she played throughout her career reflect that 'ocker' Australian quality—cringeworthy but endearing, ordinary but entertaining. Her characters included Possum, Tricksie O'Toole and other 'tarts with hearts' or 'tarts without hearts'.

Throughout the interview and in the footage, we see some of the elements of these characters—the brazen accent, slang, hairstyles and bluntness (even Princess Moonlight in the Taj Mahal doesn't beat around the bush). These are characters who stand against propriety, refinement, politeness and affectation, which forms part of their comic appeal.

Noeline's work is important in its contribution to, and shaping of, Australian comic characters. Her work forms part of the tradition that more recent character-driven television shows, such as **Kath and Kim** (Jane Turner and Gina Riley), build on. To this tradition, we could add Dame Edna Everage (Barry Humphries), Norman Gunston (Garry MacDonald) and Crocodile Dundee (Paul Hogan). These characters have something in common—they each have something to say about what it is to be Australian.

Cultural and social conventions are important in performance, not least in developing and playing a character. In other words, conventions of the particular culture or society to which the

performer belongs go towards shaping the character. These conventions are what inspire the player and are what the spectator understands.

There are a number of elements that go into creating a character. The most obvious is the character's background: who they are, where they come from, their personality and their idiosyncrasies. Costuming is another important element, one that visually conveys a range of traits such as personality, class and ethnicity. Yet another is vernacular—the way a character speaks can reflect their social and cultural identity.

- What were some of the shows and theatre productions that Noeline Brown appeared in?
- Comment on the use of vernacular and costumes in the characters featured in the program. What effect do these elements have?
- In her anecdotes, how does Noeline use vernacular to express character (including the character's gender)?
- How does she feel about her television roles? Why might she feel that way?
- What other Australian comedic characters can you think of?
- What other elements can you think of that go towards forming a character?
- Think of some comedians or comic characters from overseas. How do they reflect their own culture/society? What makes you identify with them in spite of their belonging to another culture? That is, what universal themes are apparent? Conversely, if you cannot identify with the character/s, what might be some reasons?

Audience

Throughout her acting career, Noeline Brown worked across a number of dramatic formats that included television, radio, stage and theatre restaurant. In the interview, she highlights her experience working with audiences.

Theatre can be thought of as a collaborative art form and one of the most powerful collaborations is that between the actors and the audience. In her early acting days, Noeline worked at the Music Hall theatre restaurant. She says it was an important training ground for understanding audience participation and managing an audience. Noeline reflects on when she played Sophie Tucker: while she had everything 'down pat' for the character, it was the audience's reaction upon her stage entry that really brought the character out.

Another celebrated Australian actress, Ruth Cracknell, said in her memoirs: 'The last word always belongs to the audience'.

The interaction between actors and their audience has a strong influence on a performance. For example, the way an audience is positioned in relation to the actors will create different possibilities. A cabaret setting will produce a different experience to a performance in a large state theatre.

Greater differences exist between audiences of radio, television and film productions, and within each of these there are differing levels of audience interaction, such as talkback radio, shows with a studio audience and 'reality television'.

The mood of an audience is also important. Consider a live comedy performance. On some nights the audience can laugh at everything while on other nights the audience may barely chuckle. The audience response has a huge effect on performers and managing this response is an important technique for actors to develop.

- How does Noeline describe playing the Sophie Tucker character? What happened for her?
- What are some common characteristics of a theatre restaurant? What type of experience might it be for an audience? What additional demands might be placed on actors?
- How is the viewing experience different for stage and television?
- What might be different for an actor performing before an audience and before a camera?
- What types of television shows are recorded in front of studio audiences? What effects does this create?
- How would you describe the viewing experience that 'reality television' creates?
- What options might a stand-up comedian have when faced with an unresponsive (or derisive) audience?

Television comedy

Noeline Brown's first television role was on **The Mavis Bramston Show**, a hugely popular show that was an Australian first in a number of ways. It was the first Australian television program to make it into the country's top five most popular programs. It was the first Australian show to use social and political satire as its main source of humour. It also introduced the sketch comedy format to Australian television, a format that would continue across the decades with shows such as **The Naked Vicar Show** (in which Noeline also starred), **Fast Forward**, **D-Generation** and **Skithouse**.

Sketch comedy is one form of television comedy. It comprises short, usually single-scene structures or 'sketches'. They generally involve a setting, one or more characters and an internal timeframe within which the comic possibilities of a premise of one kind or another (such as a situation, a relationship, or a conversation and its topics) are pursued. The format is said to derive from variety shows and vaudeville.

Noeline also appeared in another comedy format—the situation comedy, or 'sitcom'. As she notes, **My Name's McGooley, What's Yours?** was one of the first Australian sitcoms. A sitcom involves a regular set of characters in a situation, and stands somewhere between sketch comedy and drama. Examples include **Kath and Kim**, **Seinfeld**, **Mother and Son**, **The Office**, **Kingswood Country** (originally a sketch in **The Naked Vicar Show** until it became an outright sitcom) and **Absolutely Fabulous**.

- Give examples of some other shows in the sketch comedy and sitcom formats.
- What other forms of television comedy are there? Give some examples.

Celebrity

Celebrities, particularly actors, have a peculiar status in our society and culture. They are public figures whose private lives, although often quite ordinary, can be charged with a high level of interest and drama. This raises the issue of the extent to which the privacy of celebrities can or ought to be protected, versus their need to receive media attention in order to sustain their popularity.

Despite her high-profile career, Noeline Brown has perhaps remained someone who has a 'common touch'. From some of the anecdotes she relates (about being recognised as 'that woman on television'), it is evident that she sees celebrity as a bit of a burden.

In the interview Noeline also shares how some of her important personal decisions were featured in tabloids and magazines, including rumoured reasons for her move to the Southern Highlands.

- How does Noeline speak of the times she was recognised in public? What might other celebrities experience in these moments?
- What other downsides might be involved in being a recognised celebrity?
- When did Noeline's public profile work to her advantage? What advantages come from celebrity?
- Can you think of examples where a celebrity's privacy has been at issue?
- If part of a celebrity's 'trade' is publicity, where should the line be drawn between publicity and an invasion of privacy?
- Aside from acting, what other fields of work do celebrities come from?

Activities

- **Character study.** Choose a comedic character from television, film or theatre. Write a synopsis of the character: where they come from, their personality, the kind of comedy format/s they appear in and so on. Discuss the use of other elements such as vernacular, costuming, make-up and set design.
- **Improvised monologue.** Prepare a character to play before your class. Think about the character's background, what they might talk about (students can choose or be given a theme), costumes, props and accent. Present a brief monologue to the class. Reflect on the experience of preparing the character and the audience's reaction.
- **Group work.** Build a character each, develop a sketch and perform it to the class.

EMPLOYMENT ISSUES

Working overseas

Nicole Kidman, Kylie Minogue, Mel Gibson and Russell Crowe all did it. Each of these entertainers started out in Australia and took their careers overseas to much larger markets, such as the United Kingdom and United States. Noeline Brown on the other hand declined the move, explaining that while she did visit London early on, 'the pull of Australia was enormous'.

In an increasingly globalised economy, working overseas for at least a period of time is considered by many who work in a variety of industries. For entertainers, like those in many other occupations, one major consideration for making such a move is the size of markets here and overseas. Markets such as the USA and the UK are much larger and may provide a greater opportunity for work, and greater diversity for work and training.

There is a perception that Australia is too remote or isolated from industry networks, posing an obstacle to career advancement. In some ways, **The Mavis Bramston Show** celebrated this. Noeline's original role was intended to be 'a send up of the fact that in Australia you couldn't be a star, that they would import this appalling person called Mavis Bramston and she'd be so bad: she couldn't sing, she couldn't dance, she couldn't tell a joke'.

Noeline, however, made the decision to work in Australia—to blaze a trail. Working in Australia provided her with an opportunity to be part of developing Australia's own performance industry.

- What reasons does Noeline Brown give for working in Australia?
- For what reasons might a person choose to work overseas? What would be some of the challenges?
- What pressures might be on an entertainer to work overseas? Think of some other high-profile Australians who have made this move.

Trade unions

A trade union is an organisation formed by workers. Most typically, a single union will represent workers in a particular industry or craft, within all or part of a country (for example, national and state-based unions in Australia).

In many countries, a union may acquire the status of a legal entity with a mandate to negotiate with employers to maintain and improve wages and working conditions for the workers it represents. In such cases, unions have certain legal rights—most importantly, the right to negotiate, or 'bargain', collectively with an employer (or employers) over wages, working hours, and other terms and conditions of employment. This means that terms and conditions are not set unilaterally by management, but must be agreed upon by both parties. In some instances, unions might threaten strikes or other collective action to when they are dissatisfied with negotiations or in situations where companies have made significant cuts to staff.

Unions also engage in broader social or political struggle. In Australia, this has included lobbying for the protection of workers' rights and other social justice issues such as Indigenous rights, the environment and foreign policy issues. They may also have connections with political parties, as is the case with the Australian Labor Party (so named because of its origins in, and close links to, the trade union movement).

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) is the largest peak national body representing workers in Australia. It is a council of 46 affiliated unions and is the most visible aspect of the labour movements in Australia.

- What does Noeline Brown say about the importance of overtime in her family when she was a child? Identify some other terms and conditions of employment that might be the subject of negotiation.
- Why was the Australian Labor Party the natural party for Noeline to run for?
- Should unions be allowed to undertake strikes or other collective action in the negotiation process?
- Can you think of any social justice campaigns unions have been involved in?

Activities

- **Working overseas.** Select an employment industry you are interested in and a country you might like to work in. Consider the options available for working there, including how you would find employment, working visa requirements, finding accommodation and any other steps you would have to take. What opportunities might it present?
- **Union research.** Identify an industry you are interested in. Find out whether there is a union representing the industry. If there is, write a brief report on the union's background, what its role is, who it represents, whether there are any fees and details of any campaigns.
- **Industrial reform.** In 2005, the Australian Government introduced reforms to industrial relations law, with some changes relating to union involvement. Write a brief synopsis, looking at the implications of the reforms for unions and different perspectives on the reforms (especially from unions and industry representatives).

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Noeline Brown

Noeline Brown, **Noeline: Long Term Memoir**. Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2005

Noeline Brown official website: www.noelinebrown.com.au

Internet Movie Database entry for Noeline Brown (cites television and film work):

www.imdb.com/name/nm0114356

ABC online—George Negus interviews Noeline Brown: www.abc.net.au/gnt/profiles/Transcripts/s1200818.htm

Website on **My Name's McGooley, What's Yours?!**: www.classicaustraliantv.com/mcgooley.htm

Performance

Australian Theatre for Young People: www.atyp.com.au

Character websites:

- Kath and Kim—The Official Website: www.kathandkim.com
- Dame Edna Everage—The Official Website: www.dame-edna.com
- Nostalgia Central—The Norman Gunston Show: www.nostalgiacentral.com/tv/comedy/normangunston.htm
- Bob Downe: <https://www.youtube.com/user/bobdowne4real>

Employment issues

Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU): <http://www.actu.org.au/>

Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations: www.dewr.gov.au

The Australian Workplace—an Australian Government portal: <https://www.employment.gov.au/workplace-relations>

Australian Labor Party: www.alp.org.au

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