

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

SERIES 11

A SERIES THAT PROFILES SOME OF THE MOST
EXTRAORDINARY AUSTRALIANS OF OUR TIME



JUNE DALLY-WATKINS

MODEL, BUSINESSWOMAN



JUNE DALLY-WATKINS (1927-)

INTRODUCTION

This program is an episode of Australian Biography (Series 11) 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.

SYNOPSIS

Entrepreneur and deportment educator June Dally-Watkins is one of Australia's best known models. Born in 1927, June grew up on a remote property at Watsons Creek, near Tamworth. Her mother was a single parent, a great stigma at the time and June kept the story of her birth a secret until late in life.

When June's mother took her to Sydney's Farmers department store to ask if she could be a model, a successful career was launched. In 1950, June started the southern hemisphere's first personal development school in Sydney to train young women in etiquette and deportment. A year later, she started Australia's first model agency and modelling school and later established a Business Finishing College, juggling her work interests with bringing up four children.

June is Ambassador-at-Large for the charity, Crossroads International, and continues to be involved personally with her students.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Drama, Media, Personal Development, History and SOSE/HSIE.

Birth, childhood, growing up

June Skewes' early years in rural New South Wales were seemingly a universe of reality away from the big-city, glamorous existence she forged later, as June Dally-Watkins.

- Discuss in class why June's mother, Caroline (known as Kay), felt it necessary to visit her sister in Sydney, before June was born. Do you think the circumstances surrounding this, and the decisions Kay took, are considered important or significant today either within Australian society generally, or within particular cultural and social groups in Australia? Have times, social values and attitudes changed since 1927, the year June was born?
- Plan and write a short story loosely drawing on Kay Skewes' decision to leave Watsons Creek. (Discuss in class the range of possibilities for events, themes, settings and characters, and the approach you will take to presenting the story. For example, could it be told in first-person, diary format? Will it be a story about small-town bigotry and prejudice?)
- Discuss in class then write your own commentary on the relative merits of the 'values' June refers to early in the program. For example, what do you think her grandfather meant when he said, 'June, you'll always be judged by your writing'? What do you think she means by being a 'good person'? Are these values as valid today? Are schools expected to take more responsibility than parents for teaching children behavioural values?
- Carry out some historical research on what June refers to as the type of 'one-teacher bush school' that she attended many decades ago, then prepare and present an illustrated magazine spread about a day in the life of such a school, its students and its teacher. For example, were children expected to rise early in the morning to carry out farming duties before going to school? How did they arrive at school and go home in the afternoon without motorised transport, or even, in some cases, the benefit of roads? Would you like to have attended a bush school? What may have been the advantages and disadvantages of such an education lifestyle? (See website references to 'one-teacher schools', and use this term to search the internet for many more Australian sites.)
- In pairs or small groups, plan a drama scene, or a sequence of short scenes, drawing on June's experiences of being accused a 'little bastard'. While planning, you may wish to consider how you could create a link between reacting to these kinds of situations, and the drive to be a 'good person', to 'dream of Hollywood' and to pursue a career in self-improvement. Workshop with others and refine your work as necessary, then carry out a reading to the class. (An alternative may be to plan the activity purely for sound, and to record it as an audio file for playback on your school intranet.)
- Write a set of personal diary entries about June's life abruptly changing when her mother married Major David Dally-Watkins and moved to Sydney. Ensure you bring to the surface the narrator's inner thoughts and emotions. For example, would there be a sense of confusion, relief or doubt in her voice?
- Research the wartime events in Sydney that brought June and her mother back to Tamworth and recreate this as a short 'social notes' report in the local newspaper about their arrival from Sydney. (Consider carefully how you would present the wording and tone of this item.)

Career, the wider world

While viewing the program we can see very early on the influences and dynamics that led to June becoming a model (or 'mannequin') and forging a career in the big city, far away from her formative beginnings.

- From the program, discuss in class and write a commentary on the behind-the-scenes influence of Kay Dally-Watkins in encouraging, developing, guiding and perhaps even controlling June's career. Include a view as to why Kay was so dedicated to this, and why June may have been so accepting of it. Do you think June demonstrated her own sense of independence, or was she, in a sense, entirely her mother's 'pawn'?
- Referring to her mother's interest in June's career, we are told, 'It was her passport to everything'. Plan and write a short story in which this is the dominant theme and plot element; it does not have to be directly based on June's biography. You may present the story in dramatic or comedic mode and from whatever point of view you wish.
- After viewing the program write two sets of personal diary extracts drawing on June's adventures in Hollywood and her relationship with such famous actors as Gregory Peck. Write one as though you were June; the other as though you were her mother, back in Sydney. (Try to bring the conflicting emotions, uncertainties, desires, needs and fears of both the June and Kay 'characters' to the surface in their diary entries.)
- Discuss the wide possibilities and choices in class first, then write your own 'alternative biography', in about 300-400 words, of June's life had she remained in Hollywood and opened a school to groom the movie stars. Do you think her relationship with actor Gregory Peck may have survived? Would her schools in Australia have closed? Would she have eventually returned to Australia?
- June has said elsewhere that today she would not be accepted as a model, because modelling requirements have changed over the years (see website reference to Dally-Watkins, the *Talking Heads* TV program). Research and, in pairs, create one or more website pages, or a magazine spread, about fashion modelling at the time June began her career in the mid-1940s, showing how the requirements and styles of modelling differ from what is prevalent today. If possible, offer explanations as to why these changes have taken place, and whether the career path, qualifications and training of being a model have altered over the years. (This may relate to both female and male models.)
- Discuss in class whether 'becoming a better person', developing an 'individual personality' and gaining the means by which you 'may not only look, but be lovelier', can be taught through attending classes in personal development. What kind of clients would attend these classes and what might be their motivations?
- Critics of the modelling industry argue its exploitation of young women, its links to such conditions as anorexia and its portrayal of unrealistic images of female body shape, size and height. With such criticisms in mind, plan and write a considered critique, in 500 words, of the 'Dally way'. (See website reference to 'politics of glamour').
- Catherine Deveny, in her 'Couch Life' TV review column for *The Age* newspaper, says, "*America's Next Top Model* does nothing to dispel the myth that beautiful people who get paid to wear clothes and walk around loving themselves sick for a living are vain, shallow and vacuous. Which is good." (See books and periodicals references.) Debate in class the question of whether the world of modelling is all superficial glamour and no substance, completely unrelated to the lives and values of most people, then write your own essay-style argument expressing your viewpoint on this topic.
- The interviewer suggests to June that as a model she must have had many male admirers. Write a short story about this. You may wish to draw on June's anecdote about having a dinner date with a companion, where mother came too. Would you write it as a comedy, a satire, a serious social drama?

The dark side

Despite June's success as a model and in her business activities, the attitudes of others around her could today be considered sexist. In a world of glamour, beauty and the veneer of perfection, there was a dark side under the surface.

- Discuss in class and write your own notes about the attitudes June encountered from others, such as her new father-in-law, towards not only being a woman in business but a woman in business **and** simultaneously a mother raising a family. What was her reaction? Consider also the following:
 - Do you think her husband need have been concerned that he was the only man in his circle to have a wife who went out to work?
 - What pressures were on him from his own male colleagues and friends?
 - Why did she feel 'unbelievably guilty' about being a working mother?
 - Have times and attitudes changed since the mid-20th century, or do you think that there is a prevalent feeling that married women and women with children, should only go out to work if they have to?
- Drawing on the program and from the previous activity, work in pairs to produce a short play script depicting the pressures placed on both a woman and a man, derived from the social values of the day, towards women's role in the home and the workplace. With other students as required, rehearse and redraft the script then act it out or present a play reading to the class.
- Devise and create an illustrated poster depicting the accepted roles of middle-class women in Australia during the mid-20th century in comparison to what you consider is the situation today. You may present this in a humorous way or as a serious historical commentary. An alternative presentation may be to confine the contents of the poster to June's own life, as a specific example. Give your poster a title, e.g. 'Then and Now'.

- View June's comments about the way men responded to news of the Len Lawson rape case, then discuss in class their attitudes. Do you think these attitudes represent a case of male group bravado or is there an underlying significance to their comments requiring a form of re-education? Are these kinds of attitudes widely prevalent today? If you came across these types of comments and attitudes today, how would you respond to them?
- Apart from the scandal June refers to, Len Lawson was quite well-known in his day. Research and write a biography in 400-500 words about his artistic and professional career. You may wish to illustrate your work with relevant images.

Private realities, public image

As we see in the program, it was only in later life that June could openly acknowledge her secret past, at last drawing together the threads of her two separate identities.

- Discuss in class whether you think it was necessary for June to hide the details of her past for so long. Would it have made a difference to her career prospects, had her past been known to others, such as those in the modelling business and in the media?
- Plan and write a short drama about someone who becomes a success, or is about to reach fame and success, in a particular field of endeavour, while harbouring a personal and potentially damaging secret from the past. If the secret is made public, will it ruin him or her?
- Research the purpose, aims and work of Crossroads International then use desktop publishing software to write, illustrate and design an article about the organisation for a magazine aimed at young teenagers.
- June says that although she may have seen her real father at mannequin parades later in her life, they never spoke. In pairs, devise a scripted, imaginary conversation in which they may have met after one of these events. What would they say to each other? Try to imagine who this man could have been and what his circumstances were.
- Discuss in class, then write a short 'deconstruction' analysis of the meaning of June's public smile, ranging from her modelling career and her teaching activities, to confronting and dealing internally with difficult issues that were of concern to her.

Media studies

Carry out the following media-related activities:

- Taking the facts and themes of June's life as you know them from the program and from further research, how could you fashion the details into a dramatised feature movie? Decide which aspects you would develop into a narrative, then devise and prepare a promotional poster for a film based on June's life. Ensure you give the film a title, a catch phrase and a short, promotional description, with at least one visual image to accompany the text.
- In pairs or small groups plan a storyboard on poster paper, with script, for a 30-second or 60-second TV advertisement for any one of the types of training programs offered by such organisations as JDW (see website reference to Dally-Watkins).
- View *The Chaser's* satirical web page about June Dally-Watkins (see website references). Write a short review of the contents, discussing the purpose, point of view and the effectiveness of the satire, and whether or not you think it is fair, hurtful and warranted.
- Discuss in class, then write your own commentary on the range of images the program presents of June, drawing attention to archival photos and film and the ways in which those images are either seemingly 'natural' or overtly constructed, styled, lit and framed. (For archival film, you may also refer to any accompanying voice-over narration.) Compare this to film of June shot by the program makers themselves. What viewpoint does the program itself present of June: does it offer an opinion, does it pass judgement, is it subjective, objective?
- Draft, write, edit and proofread a review of the program in about 300-400 words for a popular weekly TV magazine or website.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

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A Film Australia National Interest Program

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Writer/Interviewer: Robin Hughes

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