



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES

Number 62 October 2021

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

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To cite this article: Peters, C. (2021). Boxed in: Covid-19, comedy, and a captive audience. In F. Collins, H. Joyce and N. Maloney (Eds.) *The Place of Writing in Intercultural and Intermedial Creative Collaborations*. TEXT Special Issue 62.

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Abstract:

This article considers the place of screenwriting practice in relation to comedic television projects created during an extended lockdown period in Australia and internationally. During times of global disruption, society has repeatedly relied on the literary and performing arts to entertain and inform. I will use the television series *Retrograde* (2020) as a case study to consider screenwriters' resilience during times of turbulence and unrest and how they were able to create television in isolation to deliver comic relief to an online audience. *Retrograde* was written and produced entirely online in direct response to the restriction of movement and face-to-face interactions imposed due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. The comedic television show was written for a multiscreen performance and features a predominantly female writing team and cast. It is set in the online video conferencing space, which many have become accustomed to using for educational, professional, and social encounters during lockdown. *Retrograde's* characters depict the intersection of cultures of disability, sexuality, gender, race, and class, with the shared experience of being stuck at home, alone together. The *Retrograde* project proves intercultural representations can flourish within screenwriting practice when given the opportunity, and intermedial collaboration is possible despite the imposed hindrance of isolation.

Biographical note:

Charmaine Peters is a PhD candidate at Melbourne's La Trobe University researching screenwriting in the context of comedy and female perspectives. Her particular interest is in how the female comedic voice has been, and is being, defined in Australian television.

Keywords:

Retrograde, Australian television comedy, intersectional screenwriting, digital fiction

Introduction

This paper will examine how the creators of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) television series *Retrograde* (Lapsley, Lake, & O’Connell, 2020) worked remotely to develop and produce the show while adhering to Australia’s strict Covid-safe guidelines. This discussion of content created for consumption online will include some examples of the opportunities and constraints this medium presents. Examination of the effects of a global pandemic on society and its creative writers is embedded in this discussion. Additionally, there will be a focus on Covid-19 themed comedy and works created, written and characterised by women.

A captive audience

The dynamic nature of the arts and cultural industries means working writers, artists, and performers are particularly vulnerable during catastrophes. Yet paradoxically, this is when we tend to rely on these industries for guidance and relief. Throughout 2020 (and beyond) the force of the Covid-19 global pandemic crippled these industries and forced performing and non-performing creatives to investigate new ways to create and present their work. Creators and audiences alike have taken to digital formats and platforms available online to fill the gap left behind when entertainment outlets like theatres, cinemas, and arenas closed their doors. Captive audiences isolated at home yearn for an entertaining escape, or comic relief from the challenges of their daily reality.

The advent of pandemics in the history of humankind has always been accompanied by a series of social, political, and economic measures (Fernandez, 2020, n.p.) Arguably the most disruptive aspect to our lives resulting from the Covid-19 global pandemic has been the government mandated lockdowns which forced individuals, workplaces, communities, cities, and entire countries into isolation. When humans feel unsettled during times of crisis we look for new ways to cope. Maintaining a sense of humour promotes good health by acting as a coping mechanism against the negative effects of stress (Roscoe, 2017, p. 1438). According to academic Simon Vurayai (2020, p. 1595), alternative forms of entertainment, including digital or online, play an ‘important function to help people to endure the challenges they face especially when other forms of entertainment have been put on hold’. In addition, people seek to make meaning of the uncertain state they and the society at large are currently in. According to screenwriter and academic Helen Jacey (2014, p. 241), writers’ role in society’s representation of itself is a crucial one; they encourage audiences to think through the propositions about the world that writers present. This responsibility for writers to represent society to itself seems even more crucial when society’s status quo is disrupted and is desperately seeking relief from its discomfort. Helga Kotthoff (2000, p. 57) insists comedic narratives ‘define situations, and those who laugh along with them share these definitions’ warranting their socially influential impact. Writer Chris Murphy (2020, p. 1) insists:

In times of crisis, when we are frightened and don’t know what the hell is going on, we have historically turned to comedy. Comedy, as frivolous and inessential as it may seem, is humanity’s free coping mechanism, a medium that both distracts us from the

horrors of the world while allowing us to get our best and worst thoughts out of our heads and off of our chests.

With the limitations imposed on live performance venues in response to Covid-19 safety guidelines, writers of comedic narrative fiction have proved agile enough to produce satisfying online content using minimal cast and crew. This has presented in the form of limited-episode television productions, featuring online web conferencing platforms as settings within settings for their narratives.

It's all in the delivery

Scripted television's mode of delivery has been transformed fundamentally in keeping with the digital age we live in. Neil Landau (2018, n.p.) points out the television business has radically changed into an 'on-demand ecosystem'. Commercial streaming and premium networks operate on a steady diet of monthly subscription fees paid by viewers, rather than the advertising revenue model necessary for commercial networks to function (Landau, 2018, n.p.). This has led to a reliance on live-to-air, news, game shows, and reality television for commercial networks instead of scripted drama and comedy, which is less financially viable for them to produce. This is particularly true in Australia with its population of 25 million people, and only three free-to-air commercial networks who rely solely on paid advertising for their revenue.

In contrast, streaming platforms demand a continuous flow of new scripted content to feed to their subscribers. Set apart from these commercial models are the two Australian government funded entities: the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), who both offer the conventional free-to-air and on-demand viewing modes of delivery. Sally Riley (Screen Australia, 2020), Head of the Drama, Comedy, and Indigenous department at the ABC claims:

Making scripted content means it's not always easy to respond in the moment to the terrifying events and changes in our world. But we've reimagined the way we make drama and comedy to bring Australian audiences a show that illustrates the very real impact the pandemic has had on life as we know it. Crossing humour with a layer of existential dread, *Retrograde* tracks from beginning to end our journey of the first wave of lockdown.

The creative team responsible for *Retrograde* have set out to produce a series that is more than simply a record of what we have all gone through and have strived to innovate the way stories are presented on television screens. According to Alice Bell (2010, p. 1) digital fiction is:

Fiction written for and read on a computer screen, that pursues its verbal, discursive, and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium.

In *Retrograde*'s case, the entire premise and setting of the show are predicated on a digital platform aesthetic and the show could not exist in a non-digital medium. The semiotic features are embedded into the narrative through its reliance on real world technology simulated in its artificially constructed online world. The show is set on a digital platform and uses visual digital modes as narrative devices throughout. For example, characters have a private online chat shown on screen all happening simultaneously in a scene where there are several characters on screen (within their individual screens) playing out an entirely different interaction. In this way, *Retrograde* is an innovative use of the digital fiction medium as means of representing and interpreting the complexity of real life in lockdown.

Too soon?

Retrograde was commissioned by the ABC for its streaming platform iview and was written, performed, filmed, edited, and viewed entirely online. This was achieved by attaching an iPhone to each of the actors' laptops. The actors then filmed their own performances in their own homes with the assistance of one technician each. Writer Paul Donohue (2020) observed one of these filming sessions remotely and described the experience as a kind of 'purgatory between real life and simulation'. This is an apt description of the frustrating experience of many of us who were confined to our homes during Covid-19 lockdowns and were dependent on liminal space of digital communications platforms as a proxy for interpersonal interaction.

The setting for the series is an online virtual bar where each of its six episodes takes place in the form of a video conference call. The transitions between the various screens depicted onscreen are seamless, and the production values are high. Written chats between group members are viewed onscreen, simulating real world systems currently being used as a substitute for in-person interactions. In Christopher Pullen's (2014, p. 285) view, whether directly or indirectly, screenwriters 'write about themselves, or at the very least, they frame their personal ideas, contexts, and skills in the mediation of a narrative'. Writers are naturally prone to write about the things they know and are familiar with, often to process or make sense of their own experiences. As *Retrograde* series co-creator, Meg O'Connell (Screen Australia, 2020) explains:

The Covid-19 lockdown means the characters in *Retrograde* are finally having the existential crises they put off having in their twenties. They're being forced to look at their reflections in the mirror (or video call) and are asking themselves: Do I like what I see?

The show's title *Retrograde* seems fitting as the word means 'to move backward, have a backward motion or direction, retire, or retreat' (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Narrative comedy teacher Tim Ferguson (2016, p. 6) ventures that laughter grants us perspective, allowing us to stand at a distance from an event to take it in, process it, and then move on. Ferguson's (2016) view is an extension of Steve Allen's (1957, p. 12) equation that comedy equals tragedy plus time. I suggest there has not been enough time or distance for audiences to put Covid-19 into context, and certainly not to move on, as the global community still grapples with the consequences of the ongoing pandemic and the effects of intermittent stay-at-home restrictions.

The development of *Retrograde* took place in the space of four short weeks rather than the 12-month incubation period allocated in usual circumstances (Donohue, 2020). The screenwriters wrote privately and then met online to collaborate using the very platform chosen for their story world setting. *Retrograde* spans the period of Australia's first lockdown in March 2020, with its release just four months later in July 2020 coinciding with a second lockdown in Melbourne, which extended for over 100 days (July to October 2020). When questioned about how receptive she believed audiences would be to the experience of confronting the lockdown in pop culture while still in its grip, O'Connell (in Donohue, 2020) replied, 'I think people want to see their own situation reflected back to them'. However, as someone who endured the lengthy Melbourne lockdown in 2020 while working from home, simultaneously with school-aged children learning from home, my own response was – too soon! Once the novelty of watching a show during lockdown, which itself was filmed during lockdown, has worn off, audiences may be left with a sense of being boxed in by the experience instead of one of release.

Boxed in

Retrograde's creators challenge audiences to be excited by the prospect of watching a show framed through a series of square boxes onscreen when they may have already spent the day working at a screen and viewing their work colleagues via square boxes onscreen. While this format does invite a sense of familiarity, it can also breed contempt. The slick scene transitions between the screens, within the screen between the characters who are themselves isolated from each other, invokes an atmosphere of disconnection instead of intimacy at times (Hawksley, 2021). The choice to situate *Retrograde*'s scenes as onscreen boxes onscreen may have been imposed by the pandemic restrictions; however, these constraints have not hampered their production ingenuity. Television critic Anthony Morris (2020) insists:

Covid-19 might have stripped back production, but it showcases what core elements are always going to be necessary: a strong script, good performances, and clear visuals are a must regardless of budget – and regardless of your ability to get out of the house.

With so many creative practitioners unable to find an outlet for their practices in these unique conditions, this collaboration is an example of how they can join forces to produce projects of value despite limitations. In Australia, the Arts sector were not offered any direct financial assistance from federal government sources during lockdowns and were forced to find their own means of support. The dire implications of this withdrawal of funding cannot be underestimated. Many creatives gravitated to the online space to attempt to recoup losses of income with varying degrees of success. While audiences may tire of the pandemic subject matter, creatives can build on the experience of creating projects in collaboration during isolation. Practitioners may strengthen their skills in production core elements of screenwriting, acting performances, and good visual grammar, knowing they can collaborate with others in ways not previously realised. Productions such as *Retrograde* have indicated that collaborations are no longer dependent on the parties being commonly located. This is particularly beneficial for screenwriters who may want to work with other writers who write in different mediums or genres.

Levity with gravity, or gravity with levity?

Retrograde is slated as a comedy and does conform to some of the conventions of a sitcom. This is signalled by each of its six episodes being roughly 22 minutes in duration, its humourous tone, and that the show is largely filmed using a static multi-camera format. However, I contend the show is more in keeping with the hybrid genre of Dramedy. This classification is applied broadly to shows that evenly distribute the tensions between humour and drama, or levity and gravity. The Dramedy genre tends to focus more on comedy arising from the characters' flaws and choices, rather than the comedic situation the characters may be placed in (Feasey, 2012, p. 71). Additionally, because of its serialised format, *Retrograde* is best viewed in its chronological order unlike a sitcom where each episode is self-contained, and episodes can still be appreciated when viewed independently, or in any random order.

Comedy writer and teacher Steve Kaplan (in Taylor, 2015, p. 74) believes 'Drama helps us dream who we can be while Comedy helps us live with who we are'. In this way, *Retrograde* attempts to help us live with who we are, yet makes no real challenge to help us aspire to something more, perhaps due to the constraints Covid-19 has placed upon us all. Author Neil Landau (2018) explains that if traditional sitcoms are about 'likably flawed characters getting into and out of trouble, then dramedies are more about coping with the ongoing hardships and moral complexities of relationships'. The balance of levity and gravity is weighted towards the latter in this case. However, *Retrograde* lacks a central element to anchor it in the way other Covid-comedy offerings have done. For example, British television production *Staged* (Kuschevatzky et al., 2020-2021) had the central premise of the characters rehearsing for a play, and the Australian television web series *Love in lockdown* (Butler & Hope, 2020), used online guitar lessons as a premise and purpose to anchor its narrative. For this reason, *Retrograde* will remain a one-off series as its story engine does not have enough fuel to propel it into another season. Pop culture writer Christopher Murphy (2020, p. 1) asks:

What could be funny about a global pandemic that has altered the very fabric of our existence, in one fell swoop, shutting down everything we hold dear, from sports to movies to music to the very notion of human interaction? How could anyone possibly write jokes at a time like this?

There are plenty of issues with both levity and gravity to contend with in this series, including chronic illness, relationship breakdowns, homelessness, unemployment, and death. The expected Covid-comedy tropes are also present: pants-less video calls, toilet paper shortages, home-baked sourdough, frozen or lost digital connections, and the loathsome mute button all feature (Morris, 2020, TV Review). However, the comedy in *Retrograde* is mined from the characters and the choices they make to deal with the problems encountered due to the lockdown, rather than gags and jokes. Like all good narrative fiction productions, the strength of *Retrograde* is in its characters, and the strength of its characters is a result of the strength of the writing.

The 51%

The central character of *Retrograde* is Maddie and her satellites of five friends all aged in their thirties. The creators have gathered a diverse cast that includes a gay man of colour, an Asian-Australian, an Indian-Australian, and an auto-immune compromised woman. This is a testament to the diversity present in the team of writers and creators. To watch a show that centres a woman, along with female perspectives, is refreshing. There is an entrenched assumption that what men have to say is universal, while what women have to say is largely of interest only to other women (Dunn, 2013, p. 21). *Retrograde* does a decent job of representing the issues that affected all genders during lockdown; however, I contend there was a missed opportunity to present issues of gender inequality that have been exposed during this period.

Comedy is one of the most important ways a culture talks to itself about itself (Horton & Rapf, 2013, p. 4). In such troubling times audiences are hungry for content that reflects their circumstances yet simultaneously offers relief or escape from them when they are surrounded by so much uncertainty. One of the outcomes of the lockdown is the gap between male and female experiences. Academics Rae Cooper (2020) and Sarah Mosseri (2020) have identified three areas that have disproportionately negative impact on women due to the global pandemic.

Firstly, essential frontline industries including, teaching, nursing, cleaning, and supermarket attendants have an over-representation of female workers. Secondly, women are more frequently in positions that are part-time or casual, and were the first workers to be stood down during this crisis. And thirdly, women who are working from home are more likely to add housework and home-schooling duties to their workload (Cooper & Mosseri, 2020, n.p.). This is a further indicator that the development of the project was too hasty. Helen Jacey (2010, p. 179) contends that during the script development and creation of female characters:

It is all too easy to narrow the scope of your story ideas and concepts when you have a heroine in mind. It's as if we still want to give our heroes and heroines very different territory to roam in the worlds of our stories. We are still risk averse in what we allow heroines to do and be.

A decade on from Jacey's observations, we are still grappling with parity of gender representation onscreen. However, we are seeing a much broader depiction of female characters and a greater number of television shows featuring a woman as the central character. Had more time been allowed to transpire, these current societal aspects may have been woven in to the story or character development to deepen the story. According to Linda Mizejewski (2014, p. 63), feminism is still thought of as an unpalatable element for many younger female writers that can only be included into female comedic narrative by stealth. Academic Staci Taylor (2015, p. 72) suggests advances achieved by women working in comedy are perhaps 'less a legacy of progression than a triumph against poor odds'. While it is encouraging to see female driven projects like *Retrograde* get developed and funded, there is still a wide gap to close if female representation is to match or exceed the representation afforded to male centric productions.

Conclusion

The consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic have left many workers in the arts and cultural industries devastated, with women particularly vulnerable. With regular outlets unavailable, creative practitioners have collaborated in new ways to find innovative ways to present their work. Creators and audiences alike have taken to digital formats available online to fill the gap left when entertainment outlets like theatres, cinemas, and arenas closed their doors. *Retrograde* creators have cleverly used innovations on-screen which would not have been achieved in a non-digital era, fittingly making the project a product of its time. The screenwriters have taken advantage of the home isolation period as an opportunity to collaborate, but also as mode of screenwriting innovation. They have taken the challenging situation they themselves were/are in and harvested it to create a script for multiscreen performance. However, a more extensive development period may have resulted in a greater balance of elevated moments of levity and gravity. Despite this, the creators of *Retrograde* have achieved a remarkable feat to produce a solid project that reflects the challenges society has endured during the Covid-19 global pandemic.

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