

Dr Nell Greenwood

CEO, Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS)

Jad Al-Masri, Violinist, Composer, Director, Designer, and Law & Media Arts Graduate, sits down with **Dr Nell Greenwood**, CEO of AFTRS, to discuss Nell's career, her thoughts on being a leader in the creative industry, and the intersection between law and creativity.

Dr Nell Greenwood is an academic leader, teacher, screenwriter and researcher with over twenty years of experience in screen education and international film and television production. Nell's screen credits include 'False Witness' for UKTV (Foxtel) that won the AFI for Best Miniseries, and telefilm 'Pride and Joy' that was nominated for Best TV Film at the 46th Monte Carlo TV Film Festival. Nell is currently Chief Executive Officer at the Australian Film Television and Radio School. Nell has worked at AFTRS for over 12 years, across several positions including Head of Screenwriting, Course Leader for the MA programs, Head of Programs and Director of Curriculum & Student Registrar. Nell is passionate about creativity and social impact. She has a PhD from the University of Sydney on Creativity and the Unconscious in the Screen Arts.

JAD AL-MASRI: Nell, I appreciate your time. To begin, rather than ask about what motivated you to pursue your career path, I'd like to take a different approach: one that can elicit greater detail and be of greater utility to those who may wish to emulate your path. What did you say yes to, and no to, to eventually reach your current position at AFTRS?

Dr NELL GREENWOOD: I said yes to applying for jobs that I was really drawn to, even though they scared me. There's that famous Hewlett Packard study that found that women will only apply for jobs if they meet 100% of the qualifications, whereas men will apply if they meet 60%. And that stat really resonated with me. There was follow-up research published by Tara Sophie Mohr in the Harvard Business Review that challenged whether this was indeed about women's confidence or in fact how women perceive rules within organisations.

If you look at the recent Women in the Workplace 2023 report published by McKinsey, you get a clear sense of why this might be. The report finds that women are just as ambitious as men, if not more so; but there are still real inequities between the experiences of men and women in the workplace and who gets promoted and why. I've had these experiences – all the way from people assuming I'm not the CEO ("you don't seem like a CEO"), to the number of emails I get addressed to 'Neil'. And as a white woman, I need to acknowledge that, as the McKinsey report demonstrates, for women from culturally and racially marginalised groups, it's harder: wearying assumptions, unconscious biases, microaggressions. These all play into women's sense of safety at work and whether we can and should take risks, like going for that promotion. So if a job requires skills or qualifications that you don't have, why would you go for it if you feel that you're

continually countering assumptions about your gender and cultural background? It's hard to take that risk, that leap of faith and convince yourself that you will be able to grow into a role or learn on the job in the same way a male peer would.

So we need to do more – we need to look at our recruitment processes, and we need to keep paying attention and proactively putting time and resources into this area, like succession planning and mentoring, so progression and promotion in our workplaces are genuinely equitable.

JAD: Are there any recent legal developments that you have seen really shape the creative process in screen writing and production?

NELL: IP is an interesting one – especially around understanding ownership of creative property; what does that mean and what are the legal protections for creatives in this new world of AI, fan fiction and deepfakes. We are at a new frontier of IP and considering big questions like the moral and ethical value of IP; boundaries of fair use and our responsibilities in relation to Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) protocols.

Prompted by the new National Cultural Policy, *Revive*, there are some timely and important conversations happening about modern awards, contracting and minimum standards for the arts and screen sectors, underpinned by the idea of artists as essential workers, and finding fair, appropriate and practicable ways of acknowledging and remunerating creative activity. The Fair Work Commission is undertaking a Review of the Awards (including the BRECA - Broadcasting, Recorded Entertainment and Cinemas Award) and the outcomes of this will be interesting to see.



JAD: Is there any advice you would give to lawyers working with creatives?

NELL: Be clear! Creatives exist in a world of infinite possibilities, I think best described by that wonderful Keatsian idea of negative capability. We writers exist in doubt, so clear, direct advice that gives the rationale, the why, of decisions is important.

And in that very spirit, I also need to present the equally true idea that many creatives are also excellent quantitative thinkers and problem solvers so don't be afraid of getting into the detail.

Finally, it is worth noting that lawyers too are creatives. Lawyers have skills that transfer well into our creative industries. Our Masters of Arts: Screen Business, for example, has trained lawyers to create successful creative organisations in the screen and broadcast sector.

JAD: With your extensive experience in screen education, what skills do you see as being essential for the next generation of filmmakers and content creators?

NELL: AFTRS is a School founded on the idea that stories matter – and that highly skilled, visionary Australia filmmakers, podcasters, screenwriters are integral to the health and strength of a nation because stories have the power to shape us – who we are, and whom we can be on an individual and national level. It's an idea that I find powerful and inspiring. And with that idea in mind, and considering the complexity of the world we are living in now – the amount of information, the volume of content, the need for extraordinary stories – we need content creators who can bring curiosity, kindness and courage to their creativity.

JAD: How has the rise of AI, digital platforms, and AR/VR technologies influenced traditional film and television production? What opportunities do you think this presents for creators?

NELL: I think there can be a lot of fear around this question – the idea AI will be the death of creativity – but it's not the tech we need to be concerned about. It's the humans behind the tech. So yes, there are massive opportunities here. AI is able to create and put together worlds in an instant that used to take hours and hours to create. This is incredible from an accessibility point of view – this kind of storytelling and world-creating is now available to everyone – and from an imagining-what's-possible point of view. But, and this is a big but, we have to talk about and establish the ethics and protocols for this new frontier of creation. And this is a big part of how we support our staff and students to engage with AI. We also have to make sure we have the legal parameters and frameworks we need and that are practicable and fair, in a world where questions of IP, data sovereignty and authorship are being challenged at a fundamental and pretty profound level.

JAD: How do you foster motivation within your team in a field as dynamic as film and television?

NELL: I work in a world of storytellers; so, for me, narrative is a critical part of motivation. I really need to understand the 'why' of any decision – and I've found this really helps rallying people to a cause or a new project. And in the world we live in now, post-COVID, in a climate emergency, people are looking for purpose – people want to understand the impact of their work within the bigger organisational picture.

I also think this is a time of cultural change, we're talking about decolonisation, positionality, and we're seeing more people prioritising values-alignment in how and where they want to work, and really wanting to see these values genuinely driving decisions and organisational priorities. I'm also a big believer that everyone needs autonomy and agency in their roles – you can't underestimate the power of intrinsic

motivation, and also how badly things can go, if that's not in place for a team, particularly the highly creative people who work in film, tv, radio and podcasting. And of course, it sounds simple, but can be overlooked: fair pay and reasonable working hours!

JAD: What impact would you like to see celebratory days, such as International Women's Day, have on the Australian cultural and creative scene?

NELL: Creating time amidst the operational flux and pressures to have a serious, honest conversation about where we are and what we have achieved – you need to celebrate the wins. At AFTRS, we now have gender parity on staff, including in leadership positions. 55% of our 2024 cohort of students identify as female or gender diverse. And even the disciplines which traditionally have had worryingly low number of women – like cinematography – are nearing parity. This is crucial because we are sending a new generation of practitioners out onto sets and production offices, and they will continue to shape and transform the industry.

And while we should celebrate the wins, let's also not shy away from discussing what we haven't achieved, what we still need to do. I think yes, okay to have IWD morning teas with pink cupcakes, so long as this isn't allowing us to think we've ticked the box. These are conversations that need to be happening every day – how are we addressing marginalisation and unconscious bias in our organisations? Are we actually putting resources into our professional development? Are we reviewing our policies and procedures, are we rewriting the curriculum? Are we re-inventing the structures that support the change that needs to happen?

JAD: I'm really fascinated by your work exploring the relationship between the unconscious and creativity. I'm sure we can agree that subtext, symbolism, and subliminal messages in film and creative works are deeply intertwined with unconscious contents. It would be great for you to share why you think others, especially professionals, should pay closer attention to the role of the unconscious in

their own lives. For inspiration, consider the following quote which I'm particularly fond of: "Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate." — Carl Jung

NELL: Yes indeed, it's a fascinating area. My research focusses on the role of the unconscious in screenwriting, as a powerful generator of ideas, symbolism and also solutions to problems and plot structures and how we might engage or talk about those unconscious processes within the screenwriting classrooms. And yes the unconscious can surface these incredible jewels of invention and insight; but I think romanticising it can be dangerous. It's also a repository of all the experiences you've had, the books you've read, the shows you watched, the exchanges you've had, so it can offer up as much junk as it can jewels! And I think there are broader learnings here – and I'm increasingly interested by the impact of the unconscious in leadership and management. 90% of cognition is driven by the unconscious and so as a manager whose decisions can have significant impact on the organisation where I work and the people I work with, I spend a lot of time considering how to "make the unconscious conscious". For me it comes down to creating a reflective space for myself and leveraging a kind of pause space, and this reflection time is a non-negotiable for me. It's critical to being able to check that reactivity – those hot moments when you're make decisions under pressure, or making an assessment about a person or a situation, it's finding that gap, that space and just checking in on what's happening and those buried unconscious drivers and impulses. The good thing is that now there are so many different ways of doing thing and so many resources out there – whether they're mindfulness apps, podcasts – like Pearl Tan's thought-provoking Diversity Work. And we all need to find some quiet! This was a key part of my research: social media, emails and always-on platforms make it very difficult, but if you're going to allow those incredible jewels to surface, you need stillness and quiet.

JAD: Thank you Nell! Happy International Women's Day!

Contributions & Comments

Contributions and Comments are sought from the members and non-members of CAMLA, including features, articles, and case notes. Suggestions and comments on the content and format of the Communications Law Bulletin are also welcomed.

Contributions in electronic format and comments should be forwarded to the editors of the Communications Law Bulletin at: clbeditors@gmail.com