

Peter Bentley

Press Service International Columnist

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The USA and Celebrity

The USA has long fascinated me, and this year, having just made it back from Tennessee before the COVID lockdown, I spent some time reflecting on the differences between the USA and Australia.

I am embarking on a series (not sure how long) that will focus on a particular theme in the context of American film. The first focus will be on celebrity, simply because when one considers the USA in popular terms, depending on your view, this could be seen as its greatest gift or curse to the world.

The primary film I consider is one of the most significant and fascinating documentary films I have ever viewed.

O.J.: Made in America (2016)

This filmic series by Ezra Edelman won the Academy Award Winner for Best Documentary Feature in 2017, though after its win, the rules were changed to no longer allow multi-part or limited series. It is seven and half hours, in five episodes.

From my viewing, I gained more of an understanding about the polarisation of views about O. J. Simpson. I could see that the O. J. Simpson affair was similar in impact in the wider American society to the Lindy Chamberlain saga in Australia, though the division in the USA was primarily along racial lines. In Australia, a major context was faith and religious understanding. In the 1980s and early 1990s one could not go to a dinner party without the for and against positions about Lindy coming out, well-captured in a vignette scene in the Schepsi film *Evil Angels*.

This documentary provides a broad look at American society and racially based events that led up to the trial, with a focus on the Rodney King beating in 1991 and the resultant LA riots from the acquittal of the officers in 1992. It is thus, not just about the infamous Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman murders in 1994 and Simpson's public trial through a good part of 1995 with his 'dream team' of lawyers. Explicit detail is however recounted about the murders, as the director did not want the prime context to disappear or the victims to be forgotten, while he explored this broader context in American society.

The documentary carefully frames Simpson's life, and his development as a celebrity figure from his early football career to his acting and broadcasting

career, and the celebrity endorsements that came with all his prominence as a celebrity in the changing and yet unchanged mores of the USA from the late 1960s to the 1980s. This helped set the scene for Simpson's bizarre freeway ride, an early reality TV type event that had an estimated 95 million people watching the slow pursuit and eventual arrest. Then there is the so-called trial of the century, Simpson's eventual acquittal, the civil trial and lastly his conviction for the separate case of robbery (with and other related charges) that resulted in his incarceration from 2008 to 2017.

Being a Celebrity

Simpson was seen primarily as a celebrity, and a key indication of this was simply being known by and celebrated with the initials: O. J. This is the danger with celebrity, that the cult of the celebrity shines over any other context, and in the O. J. Simpson case the murder context of his trial was overshadowed by his legal team's ability to use his celebrity status to portray him as the celebre cause for black rights in the USA.

Having such a celebrity background made it difficult to find impartial jurors that were able to put aside their own preconceived judgments and look at the murder case on its own. It reminded me of the cartoon in Australia that showed the court officers in the middle of outback Australia asking an Aboriginal man [on walkabout] what his views about Lindy Chamberlain were, and after the man says, 'Lindy who?', they look relieved as they have found their first juror.

Some of the most telling comments in the series focussed on the idea of giving 'payback'. It was almost as if being guilty or innocent were side issues.

Whether juror or non-juror, a case had seemingly found someone that some in the black community could use to say 'up yours'. Where other black men had been wrongly convicted in past times, or beaten and killed even before any trial, this trial was seen by some as the almost God-given high-profile opportunity to acquit a black man. While there is little overt religious discussion, when it occurs, mainly in interviews with ministers, it is illuminating to see how people of faith make their judgements and decisions.

I thought an apt verse for the courtroom judge in this trial to have given as direction: *These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace. (Zechariah 8: 16, ESV)*

I was also left pondering would O. J. Simpson have been acquitted if he had been a poor black man? Even with the Rodney King and LA context this is very unlikely. A poor black man would not have had the legal defence that was able to find and then sow the seeds of destruction in the prosecution's case. He would have probably taken an early plea bargain or been sentenced to death.

End Note: The People v O. J. Simpson: An American Crime Story (2016)

A brief comment on one aspect of this more popular style ten-part drama series that appeared in the same year, featuring high profile actors including Cuba Gooding Jnr as O. J. Simpson and John Travolta as Robert Shapiro, one of Simpson's lawyers. An interesting side note is that this limited series highlights the development of contemporary celebrity in the context of the Kardashians. Without the whole O.J. Simpson affair, it is unlikely that the western world would have witnessed the extraordinary development of the whole Kardashian 'celebrity for being celebrity' context, simply because their father Robert had been a close friend (and initially helped with legal arrangements) of O. J. Simpson. The media and celebrity connections helped to nurture the next Kardashian generation to a heightened celebrity status that not even O. J. Simpson would have thought possible, but then this was before social media and that is another American story.

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