

A perfect job for Uriah Heep

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— film extra

“HOW do you always find such interesting jobs?” a friend asked me the other day.

“It’s not easy,” I said, “and they haven’t *all* been interesting.”

As Michael Parkinson would have to say, in the unlikely event I turned up on his show, “In fact, you have, in fact, done some very menial tasks, generally speaking.”

When you’re stuck with an incurable workaholic what are you to do?

The tinkle of ice cubes falling into a glass of gin mid-morning and the excitement of afternoon assignations I can resist. The solution, I’ve found, is to go out and get a job. Menial or otherwise.

For a few months in 1964 I was a part-time clerk at the Melbourne headquarters of the TAB. This was, you will understand, before computers. Think about that.

“What you never have you never miss,” they say.

“Nonsense.”

The TAB had taken over the old *Argus* building in La Trobe Street and we sat on high stools at angled desks, in a vast room, sharpened pencils at the ready, waiting for the phones to ring.

Our task was to record, on narrow strips of paper, the total number of units placed on each horse or dog (they’re all called dogs *after* the race) from every TAB agent in Victoria.

We had to repeat every word the operator said, write it down swiftly, hand our strips to the collector and take the next call.

Our supervisors, mostly serious, well dressed young men, who impressed no-one with their fierce

manner, seemed to have one major concern: that we pronounce the words, mostly numbers, in a particular way.

“It’s fifer! You **MUST** say fifer,” one screamed at me the first night.

“As in Jules Feiffer?” I suggested.

“One. Two. Three. Four. FIFER,” he said, slowly and deliberately in a sort of reverse countdown, thus avoiding an explosion.

So, dutifully, I said “Fifer” and “Niner” and tried not to talk during or between races when they had to calculate the odds. If necessary, I even stayed back till it all came out right, running the risk of missing the last tram.

Around midnight, trams in La Trobe street were less frequent than the gutter crawlers who cruised along in search of prey.

On 97 cents an hour (for men \$1.32, mentioned entirely without comment) a taxi to East Melbourne was out of the question.

In my best ladylike fashion I coped with the mobile thugs, and waited for a tram to rattle down the hill.

In 1975, my husband’s workaholism had, if anything, deteriorated so I looked around for something a little more demanding in the way of mental exercise. I enrolled at the University of Sydney as that lowest form of life, a *Mature Age Non-Degree* student in the semitic studies department, in Arabic, the language and the culture.

This was before mature age students became respectable, long before the universities started running pleading advertisements to lure such enthusiasts to keep the numbers up.

My enthusiasm was unbounded. I haunted the Fisher Library and read some 24 books on the subject to produce two very poor essays, which the brilliant linguist and historian Dr Michael Carter had the grace to label “a refreshing approach”; I took picnic lunches to share with my daughter and her friends in science, I discovered the bar at Manning, and my heart skipped a beat every time I walked through the quad.

My knowledge of the language is pathetic. However, I do have a photo of myself with Michael Carter, taken on examination day, November 11, 1975, as Mr Smith was reading a proclamation on the steps of Parliament House, Canberra. Not everyone was in such good company at that moment.

Early in 1978 I took a job at the Council of Social Service, New South Wales, at the less than salubrious address, Mansion House, 180 Elizabeth Street, Sydney.

Mansion House is currently under the magic wand of Mr Leon Fink et al, being transformed into the Southern Cross Hotel.

One can only hope the resident rats have taken the eviction notices seriously. One Saturday at 7.30 am, alone in the office at my IBM

Films

NOELA WHITTON tells how her husband's workaholicism, a job at the TAB, life as a mature student and lecturing at Sydney's College of the Arts led her to her newest career, as a film extra.

machine, I saw a fat rat coming towards me.

Sightings were common enough, the place was alive with them. "They've been here longer than we have," I'd heard people say, taking pragmatism to extremes.

But this was somehow different. I decided to hold my ground. I looked at it with great severity, the way you're supposed to look at a mad dog, and, as we exchanged stares, its tail fell off.

"If looks could kill," I said out loud, not a bit surprised at the note of hysteria in my voice.

It averted its eyes and headed for the open door, a living tribute to the efficacy of Ratsak.

So, at Mansion House in 1978, rodents abounding, and in a predominantly female feminist atmosphere, I had the feeling that to dress up for work was to arouse suspicion.

In August I took a job with the fancy title — Lecturer, Part-time, Visual Communication, Design School — at the White Bay campus of the Sydney College of the Arts. Dress: Casual. Job, as at NCOSS, very interesting.

I'd taken to wearing Adidas shoes, old slacks and faded football

jerseys. It was time for a change. I couldn't go round dressed like this, even if my husband was never there to see me. There must be a job where good grooming and a touch of elegance were essentials.

So, I joined Actor's Equity, found an agent, gave an obliging photographer \$96 in exchange for some black and white pictures of myself and was launched into the exciting world of film and television.

As an extra.

Extras are those poor unfortunate souls you see, usually in pairs (one male one female), who walk across the screen, apparently engrossed in meaningful conversation, who never look at the camera.

They are referred to in the business as 'talent.' Could this be a pejorative use of the term?

Being an extra would have been the ultimate calling for Uriah Heep. I can see him, happily wringing his hands, standing around for three days in the sun/wind/rain, waiting for the magic words, "Over here Uriah. Yes, that's it. No, it doesn't matter if you smile or not. We're taking a light reading."

He'd have fairly glowed when,

after four hours of redundancy, the caterer's van arrived and they set up their usual feast, and he heard: "No. Not yet, Uriah. Stars, cast and crew first. And when they've been served you can start."

How he'd have enjoyed phoning his agent every second day at 4 to find a cheerful voice saying: "No. Nothing today. Do call again on Friday."

But it's possible the ABC would have broken even Mr Heep's spirit.

I worked on *Jonah*, a fact I haven't mentioned to a soul since I saw it, and one night, when we'd stood around in light rain for seven hours we were called just after 1 am. "All extras can go now. But be sure to be on time tomorrow."

Nevertheless, my three years as a deaf mute has done wonders for my interest in film. I fall about laughing during moments of intense drama if (as can happen) the same extras wheel about (off-camera of course) and recross the screen.

The saving is minuscule. The going daily rate, even in these heady days of ten million dollar budgets hinted at by Michael Edgley, is only \$58.30.

My first job, a commercial shot on the Harbour, was the most fun and yielded the least financial reward.

My agent had said: "Be at Number 3 Wharf, Circular Quay at 2 pm tomorrow. Dress, smart casual."

This gave me time to have a full facial, \$26, manicure, \$6, shampoo and set, \$12 — all of which took so

long I needed to take a taxi to the Quay to avoid being late.

I arrived, breathless but stunning, at a minute past two.

The crew arrived, in what I judged to be a smashed but happy state, a long time later.

I only knew about this condition because I'd sometimes been in it, in my days in advertising in Melbourne.

The shoot was great fun, but the cheque was just \$20 short of my outlay for the day, and even with the aid of a video cassette recorder stop and start button I have never been able to find myself in the ad. I could have worn my old All Black jersey.

The Bubba Bubba Bubble Gum ad was a better financial proposition but it had its drawbacks.

I had to leave home at 4.30 am for a day-long shoot at Wilberforce. An aged cowboy had been imported from the US of A to give authenticity and add to the thrill.

One of the extras climbed on a dangerous horse (former race horse, they said) and we all milled about, anxious but obedient.

I don't know what they teach at those assertiveness training places but I know where you can go for a very thorough course in humility, and still have fun while you're learning!

Anyway, there we all were. We'd been through the shot 20 times. Even the horse had had enough.

"Cut," said the director once more.

The wild horse reared and came down hard on my right foot.

Panic ensued. "Get some ice. Are we covered? It isn't broken is it? Bring a chair. Can you stand? Careful." And, from the director who looked like I felt, "Can we get you anything?"

"A cognac perhaps?" I said, showing nothing had happened to my reflexes.

I sipped the warm brandy with my foot in a bag of ice and back at the College I had as much trouble convincing anyone that I'd been stood on by a horse as I did convincing my family that I'd appeared in a Bubble Gum ad.

I nearly hit the big time once. I had a call to the airport to appear, with James Mason, in *Burning Man*. I phoned my daughter, an informed person on most matters, and said, "Isn't this something? Me in a movie with James Mason!"

"James who?" was the puzzled reaction. The cheque I got, when the shoot was cancelled at the last minute, almost made up for my overheads on the first job.

But there were some good moments. I did a couple of days on the flop of the decade, *Arcade*, and, being an extra, was not obliged to utter even one word of that awful dialogue.

The high spot was to have worked with that fine director and gentleman, Phil Noyce, on *Heavenwave*.

And not everyone can say they have appeared in several of the films on the list for the AFI awards this year, or that they've actually worked with Noni Hazlehurst, Kate Fitzpatrick, Ray Barrett and dozens of other luminaries.