

# DISMANTLING THE OTHER

Acclaimed television creator Bevan Lee is opening Australia's eyes to the electroshocking portrayal of forbidden gay love in the 1950s. Interview by Matthew Myers.



Bevan Lee (left) with *A Place To Call Home* leading lady Marta Dusseldorp.

**DNA:** The gay aversion therapy storyline on *A Place To Call Home* is quite unique to Australian TV. What has the audience reaction been?

**Bevan Lee:** So far we have had shocked and sympathetic responses on the fan sites. The number of comments of the ilk of "I had no idea this sort of thing happened" is a sad reflection of how the past can be forgotten and consequently lessons not gleaned from it.

**What triggered you to bring this storyline to light?** I was interested in dealing with social and moral areas in which change has, or hasn't, taken place in the last sixty years and highlight how much we have changed as a nation in some areas and indeed how little in others. Sadly, prejudice and bigotry will always be with us. Hopefully this story might alert people to be ever-vigilant. We have gained so much regarding attitudes to homosexuality, but we have much to lose if certain members of society have their way in turning back the clock.

**Did you conduct much research into the Australian history or real life cases?** I did a lot of anecdotal research, as so much of what went on back then was behind closed doors, society draping a veil of shame over the whole matter. We also talked to practitioners in the psychiatric field to get a sense of perceived history within the discipline. Remember, at the time homosexuality was a crime in the eyes of the law and an illness in those of the medical establishment.

**Given the sympathy this storyline raises, do you think there are still those who think the opposite?** Of course. There are some people who simply see homosexuals as 'the other', just as Jews were seen by the Nazis, as many races were and are seen by the white man, as our own indigenous population are seen by so many of their fellow countrymen. Once the other is created, it is a case of goodbye [to] empathy. And that can lead to all sorts of treatment to any group so placed in the eyes of any nation. Welcome to Russia 2014.

**Do you think there is a generation of younger gay people who are unaware of gay aversion therapy – as part of their gay history?** Without a doubt. It alarms me how ignorant the current gay generation are overall of the struggles that won them their current limited freedoms.

**In the story, James's father George was very negative after discovering his son's secret,**



even calling him a pervert. Was there a motivation for that change in his otherwise placid character? It was there because it was utterly true to what would have been the reaction of the character at the time. Even today, in more enlightened times, many basically decent fathers would recoil from news that their son is a homosexual. I know of very few parents who would strike up the band.

**The doctor who deals with James appears genuine and sincere about helping him. Do you think in reality that such medical professionals had a compassionate and legitimate intent?** I did not want to characterise the doctor as some mad homophobic zealot. To do so takes the onus off society. If we can dismiss what is done to James as the viciousness of one prejudiced man, then society is off the hook. The story takes place in a time in which we were dubbed as ill because we felt love in a different way and people could think they were doing the right thing by us to suggest a frontal lobe lobotomy to remove the condition.

**You've written for many Australian TV shows, creating a few gay characters. Are**

**there any in particular that you hold close to your heart?** I have had gay characters in all my shows. The other main one was Jonathan, a three series regular in *Winners And Losers*. He was a great fan favourite. But I am particularly fond of and proud of *A Place To Call Home*. I think the James Bligh story, and its James/Harry romance component, especially knowing where the full arc of the story goes, is one of the strongest and most

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impactful gay stories written for Australian television, without a doubt for Australian commercial television, since the days of the iconic Don and Dudley in *Number 96*.

**Your characters tend to be very original.** My main feeling, with all of my gay characters and stories, has been to write gay stories that do not preach to the converted; that do not just get through to those with the rainbow flag already on the wall. I want to write them for the heartland, where understanding does not necessarily abound, and in a way that makes people who do not feel simpatico towards gay people possibly experience a shift in their attitude. I want my gay stories to make the unempathetic feel empathy, make them think “Gosh, they’re a lot like us”. I want to help diminish the sense of gay people as the other.

**How do you feel when a show you have created becomes a success?** It’s like any parent showing their baby to the world. The oohs and ahhs of approval make the gruntings, groanings, pain and labour of birth all worthwhile.

**SEE OUR FEATURE ON GAY AVERSION THERAPY ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE.**

The dapper cast of *A Place To Call Home*.

