

Noni

what really matters now

Through her stage and screen performances, *Noni Hazlehurst* has told stories in the hope that others will recognise the essential humanity they share. Here she celebrates 'ordinary' people, real life and why it's OK to be vulnerable.

Over the course of her long and successful career, the characters Noni Hazlehurst has played have one thing in common – they are realistic people to whom an audience can relate. "If I do anything, it's to say to people it's OK to be ordinary and vulnerable," says Noni, "because there's nothing surer than that we all share those things. But that's good news because it's a great leveller."

Even *Play School*, the ABC children's program on which she worked for 26 years, taught the value of making mistakes. "We used to shoot *Play School* as a continuous half hour," says Noni, "because if something went wrong they wanted you to work through it to model to children that 'practice makes progress', not 'practice makes perfect'. Doing it that way taught me that you can only do your best. I was a bit of a perfectionist in my time."

Noni believes the media, especially commercial television, sends the opposite and often conflicting messages, encouraging perfection as a realistic aim and at the same time condoning bad behaviour.



Hazlehurst

"There have always been echelons of society that behave badly," she says. "The difference now is that they're exposed, whereas before that sort of behaviour wasn't deemed interesting. Yes, people in positions of power behaving badly should be exposed, but now people are getting to be in positions of power *because* they behave badly.

"We turn it into something that's honoured as cheeky or worthy somehow of our attention. Or we call reality television reality. There's a whole generation of kids growing up thinking this behaviour is reality. I wish someone had told me when I was young that reality was what I made it, a personal construct, rather than something I might be lucky enough to fit into when I got older, which I spent a lot of years trying to do."

When she talks to people, Noni finds them crying out for television that comes from a genuine place. She'd love to have her own show, one which honours the good things the community achieves, rather than focusing on bad news or hiding behind a mask of glamour.

"In so much commercial television the presenters seem to be having a party that the audience isn't invited to," says Noni. "It's incredibly fake. They talk to us as though we're all 14 years old. I personally find it completely irrelevant and an insult to my intelligence and I think a lot of other people do too.

"*Play School* taught me that the medium of television is an active one through which you can invoke a response. A two-year-old will not just sit and watch TV because it's on. If it's not engaging them, they'll find a hair on the back of the chair more interesting.

"It's the personal approach, not someone reading an autocue and having a vague relationship with the lens. To me, television is less and less reflecting life as we know it.

"Witness the success of *Oprah*. She's been hailed as this amazing breakthrough because she talks to people in a real way! Well it ain't rocket science. It's just talking."

Politicians also play into this unreality of perfection. "That's why we don't have statesmen or passion in politics anymore," says Noni. "They're all being moulded. None of them is allowed to say what they actually think, there's not an ounce of authenticity about it, so why would we listen? We had some ugly prime ministers in the old days

"If I do anything, it's to say to people it's OK to be ordinary and vulnerable... because there's nothing surer than that we all share those things."

but by crikey they could arouse some passion. Then television came in and the ones with the bent noses and bad teeth became less popular because we felt they had to have a certain image."

The pressure to achieve the ideal image also rears its ugly head in the acceptance of plastic surgery as a show business norm. But at 53 years of age, Noni is happy to act that age. "I don't think plastic surgery is ever convincing. Anyway, you need to have full body



PHOTO COURTESY OF ABC TELEVISION

plastic surgery, because if only your face looks 40, then you can only play 40 from the neck up!" she laughs.

"What would be the point of being 53 and looking 40 when I'm not interested in playing 40-year-olds? I am much happier to play my own age. I say to my kids, 'If you're really lucky you'll get to be as old as me.' It's a wonderful thing to get older and to have more wisdom. One of the saddest things I've ever heard was when a Gallipoli veteran was asked by a journalist, 'What's the best thing about being an Anzac?' And he said, 'It's that once a year people talk to me as though I'm interesting!'"

Personal experience has also underlined her concern that people ignore what other generations offer society. "I saw this with my own father when he was in his 40s," says Noni. "Once he'd left showbusiness, he went into advertising and he was so good at it that he taught copywriting and communications at RMIT. But he couldn't get a job in his 40s, they were all going to the people he'd taught. And this was in the 1960s."

The daily juggle

Clearly a woman of conviction, Noni has also been ambassador for Children's Week and now works with Barnardos, the organisation which promotes the 'Mother of the Year' award. Like many women of her age, she is flat out juggling the demands of work, teenagers, personal interests and the organised chaos of a life which includes her ex-partner, his new partner and children, plus her new partner, her own children and her new partner's kids.

"Motherhood is sobering," she says. "There's not an hour of any day where I don't feel I could be doing more, I haven't done it right, I wish I could do it better. It's a constant daily juggle. How can I do it successfully and then entertain the myth of 'me time'? I think when you've got children the idea of the rose-petal bath with lemongrass tea is a joke!

"For me taking time out means I go to work! I do mundane things like reading. I've got more books than I'll ever read on my shelves. I particularly like autobiographies and

travel books. I'd love to be a travel writer, but I'd have to travel first! My partner Ian is a yachting fanatic, so my big ambition is to spend six months with the boys [her two children Charlie, 18, and William, 12] on canals around Europe."

During the 10 years of working on lifestyle show *Better Homes and Gardens*, Noni was able to work from home while her children were young. After the much-publicised break-up of her relationship with actor John Jarratt, she moved to Mount Tambourine in the Gold Coast hinterland. "I was a single mum for five years," she says. "It was very hard but I was very lucky. I had a great job and support doing it. I'm filled with admiration for single mothers who have few resources and family or friends to call on. I do not know how they do it. It was fraught. You should never underestimate how children are affected by a relationship break-up and you should do everything in your power to avoid it."

Soon Noni will be making another change – moving back to Sydney. She's just completed a long theatre run at the Sydney Theatre Company, which saw her and her family racking up the frequent

flyer points. It wasn't ideal to be away from home so much but apart from paying the bills, the chance to take on a substantial theatre role was a rare opportunity.

"You realise your time to make an impact is running out," she says.

"There's lots I want to do in the next decade. I think that baby boomers will be doing different

things from previous generations. We don't have that sense of 'Ooh no, we'd better not'. That thing of 'the best china'. We're willing to travel a bit lighter. That's something I'm really looking forward to, letting go of all the stuff I thought I needed to live. The more stuff you have, the harder you've got to work to maintain it. It's nonsense."

One of the joys of being her age is that the priorities get sharper. "You're not wasting time on appearances," she says, "because that's not an option and it really doesn't matter. But I'm lucky enough to be in a relationship where I am loved for who I am, not for what I appear to be.

"I was very down on men for a while as I think women who have difficult relationships can tend to be. But someone once told me this wonderful thing. She said, 'Love is a verb'. It's an action word. When you're young it's all about 'where's 'lerv', why isn't 'lerv' finding me?'. But love is not something you passively receive. It's something you do and give and nurture."

Noni's candour and ability to connect with others have made her one of the most admired and beloved performers of her generation. "I'll be walking down the street and some 30-year-old businessman will say 'Oh, you were my favourite on *Play School*, I love big Ted' or some Goth teenager will say, 'Noni, you're so cool, I love you'. Of course, *Play School* didn't make me a better mother, it just meant I could do things with cardboard boxes!

"To me the role of the arts is to help people understand what our similarities are rather than focusing on our differences," says Noni. "It's the same as looking at a jacaranda blossom. It would be a very hard heart that would not be moved by that. It unifies us." **YL**



→ MORE

Barnardos is a charity organisation working for children's rights. Web www.barnardos.org.au

PHOTO: DEAN WILMOT