



Far left: Actors Alan Cassell and Alan Graham with Coralie Condon.

Centre: Live from on the TVW set, Coralie Condon, far right, with Lloyd Lawson.

Left: Coralie Condon, pictured in 1993.



“What’s wrong,” she asked him. “I’ve got Eartha Kitt in there,” he said. “Can you go and calm her down?”

The major recording star was deeply unsettled at not being offered the kind of things she’d become used to — someone to do her make-up, her hair, her nails — things that, back then, were simply not available at TVW.

Mr Farrell remembers the incident, too. “I used to produce the current affairs programs and we did a weekly half-hour show called Viewpoint,” he said. “The reason we didn’t have the make-up girl there was because Eartha was Afro-American and everyone, myself included, figured for black-and-white TV she wouldn’t need make-up — and Saturday was an overtime day and there was no money to pay the make-up girl.

“Eartha’s temperature started to heat up and Coralie kept her occupied while we scouted around for someone to help out. As it turned out, Eartha eventually blossomed into her famous smile and said she’d do it herself.

“I should also add that Eartha was amused to find that when she walked on to the set (austere, to say the least), we had a chaise longue of the type for which she was famous.

“She did the right thing and eventually curled up on it while answering questions from an interviewer in a straight-back chair. I think the chaise longue was the only one in Perth. Producer Brian Williams discovered it.”

Now battling macular degeneration, the fiercely independent Ms Condon said her days in television had been a joy. Clearly, even being a dogsbody had charm. ➤

Peter Harries looks at 50 eventful years

There are very few subjects of an historical nature that can be examined from their conception, through infancy, adolescence and maturity, in the short space of 50 years.

In July 1958, when the first commercial television licence was issued for Western Australia, the medium had been in existence in Sydney and Melbourne for almost two years. The fight for the first commercial licence was between TVW Ltd, headed by James Winter Cruthers, and Western Television Services Ltd, to a large degree representing the aspirations of Rupert Murdoch through the Sunday Times as part of News Ltd.

The claim of being local was eventually a key component of the TVW7 win, and the most memorable line from the formal hearing came from Mr Murdoch, who, when asked how long he would “dominate” the WTS Ltd board, answered: “I will retire as soon as I possibly can . . . There is no attempt to build an empire or anything like that. It would not interest me.”

The immediate winners from the advent of the new medium were undoubtedly the hundreds of people who were required to make the whole thing work. Without formal training, these fortunate people were inducted into a glamorous world which was the focus of hundreds of thousands of infatuated viewers.

The success or failure of any given television program, either local or imported, always depended on the “bible” of the industry, the ratings book. Averages were compiled from a limited number of collecting sheets that were left in randomly selected households and then collated to ascertain what was watched, by whom, and when. The ratings were then used as a yardstick by the advertising community as to where commercials would be placed.

After a slow start in the first six months, the clamour to “sell” on television exploded into a bonanza, as can be seen from the annual reports. In the second year of operation the shareholders received a dividend of 10 per cent, which increased to 15 per cent in the following year and 20 per cent in 1963. In 1964, the second commercial licence for WA was contested by two applicants. Once again Western Television Services Ltd presented its case and for the second time was the loser, to Swan Television.

By 1978, the shareholders of TVW7 were definitely winners, receiving a dividend of 26 per cent, with STW9 only just trailing with 24 per cent. The following year was even better for TVW7, which paid 30 per cent while STW9 dropped to 16 per cent. The

significant profits of these cash cows could not escape the attention of the corporate raiders for long and in 1981 Robert Holmes a Court, through the Bell Group, was in charge of TVW7.

The shareholders who sold out for \$10 a share did very well. STW9 continued as a family-owned station, paying itself 20 per cent for the year on investment.

In 1982, the Bell Group claimed that TVW7 was leading the overall ratings race with 44 per cent of the viewers as opposed to STW9’s 42.4 per cent. It was a fairly level playing field. The winners were certainly grinners when Alan Bond made a successful bid for STW9 and the shareholders pocketed \$7.50 for each \$1 share. At this stage there did not seem to be any losers.

Subsequently, the Bell Group had to divest itself of TVW7 in accordance with cross-media rules. The Christopher Skase-controlled Qintex Group, which bought the company, subsequently failed. The big losers this time were the ordinary shareholders. The winners on this roundabout were the owners of the conglomerate headed by the new media tycoon, WA entrepreneur Kerry Stokes.

During the early 1980s, various factors came into play which saw many losers emerge, with the cessation of the production of local programs such as children’s, women’s afternoon, quiz, talent and evening shows. Local live production had provided employment, opportunity and pleasure for many West Australians. While economic rationalism played its part, the introduction of satellites for cross-country and around-the-world transmission of television programs was a major factor.

The TVW7 executive has continually recognised the need for the station to have community involvement and responsibility. It was always close to the people and responded to their support by providing information and entertainment to the audience, not for monetary gain but because it seemed the right thing to do.

It is notable that in the era of ratings parity, TVW7’s early opponents emulated, sometimes briefly, Seven’s attitudes. Such ongoing contributions as Telethon, the Christmas Pageant and the Kings Park Lights are among the main reasons that after 50 years many people still think of Channel 7 as “our station”. ➤

Peter Harries first appeared on TVW during the first Telethon in 1968 and last in 2006 as a guest presenter on Today Tonight. In 2005 he was awarded a PhD for his thesis on the history of commercial television in Perth.