YOU'VE BEEN WATCHING LA LAW AGAIN: JANUS

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Janus. ABC TV. Thursdays, 8.30 pm.

The producer of the new ABC series *Janus*, Bill Hughes, explained in a recent interview with the Sydney Morning Herald what he saw as the ingredient that distinguished *Janus* from its rivals: 'We're a character-driven drama, as opposed to a plot-driven drama'.

A viewer of the 90-minute first episode, 'Malice Aforethought', could easily pass over this comment in silent agreement, for there is little resemblance between the familiar, rhythmically ironic unfolding of most 'legal' or 'crime' drama (*LA LAW, Rumpole, The Bill)* and the vertiginous pace of *Janus* - after 90 minutes we are still not quite sure what the plot is, or was. If the episode had a beginning - the Hennessey gang hauled up in a truck before the Victorian Supreme Court on charges of armed robbery and murder - there is no middle and no end. What seems at the outset to be the central dramatic imperative - the prosecution of the Hennessey brothers - becomes either lost in the subplots which refuse to subordinate themselves, or becomes defocused by the 'bigger issues' which jostle just outside the stage of the courtroom; the Janus Committee's criminal procedure reform agenda, the institutional politics between the police and the DPP, the civil rights of a defendant in a magistrate's court, and so on.

But *character*-driven? Driven, certainly, but perhaps the episode's most disorienting feature is its sheer remoteness from any sense of 'character' in the conventional sense. *Janus* immediately presents a shifting crowd of lawyers, policemen and criminals whose names are only dimly heard against the background noise (are we even meant to hear the names?), a crowd from which a reliable protagonist does not emerge. Even the policeman, Peter Faithful, familiar to viewers of the 1992 police series, *Phoenix,* remains only a sketch, frequently obscured, barely amounting to more than the cop out to avenge the death of a fellow 'member'. In this sense the drama is a parody of the Bunyanesque steadfastness that his name implies. When one of the Crown Prosecutors in the Hennessey trial remarks privately to a policeman that he actually believes the dubious testimony of police informer Ken Hardy, the disparaging reply is: 'You've been watching LA Law again'. This retort having been made, we know that in *Janus* the search both for faith in the law, and for faith in LA Law-style conventional narrative (the search for Faithful himself, we might say), can be abandoned.

Indeed, somewhat paradoxically, there is nothing that this episode articu-

[illegible] ling satisfactory description: the narrative indeterminacy of the accounts given by Faithful and the bank teller of the brutal Hennessey bank hold-up, related in the face of aggressive defence counsel cross-examination, is a stark example of the sheer inadequacy of legally-constrained language to *do justice* to a complex sequence of events. The drab colours of the courtroom are somehow incommensurable with the shocking black-and-white bursts of flashback images that are the 'reality' of the violent robbery. The production of the episode as a whole - with jerky camerawork, conversation heard only in snatches, and the initial labelling of the Hennessey gang as they alight from the paddywagon - aspires to the raw quality of documentary footage. It is a case of art imitating 'reality TV' and *Four Corners* style reconstructions.

The inadequacy of 'legal language' is a lack that, one suspects, *Janus* itself feels in its refusal to storytell, in its desire for a literal, documentary style, and in its refusal to elaborate on the characters of many of the standard participants in the criminal process. The Hennessey clan remain archetypal crims, the QCs are pompous, the young female lawyer succeeds because she is pushy, the cops stick up for their mates, the woman has a breakdown in the witness box .... What we are left with, what really drives the drama, is the criminal justice system itself; not the story, and not the individual participants, but the *mechanism*. Even the comic relief is generated through institutional rather than personal agency, principally through the juxtaposition of the Hennessy trial in the Supreme Court and the mindless tedium of the County Court. *Janus* offers a vision of the law as intricate, institutional *Realpolitik*, with everything - plot, character, truth, justice - being incidental to the frenetic interplay between police, prosecutors, the media, the lawyers and the bench. Much of the discourse of *Janus*, interestingly, is not the public performance of courtroom persuasion, but rather the backroom tete-a-tete of hushed negotiation and gossip.

It is very much, then, legal drama for lawyers: it is difficult to know what a person with no knowledge of criminal law and the law of evidence would make of, say, the subtleties of plea-bargaining or of informer evidence (although Hennessey matriarch Shirl makes a fist of such abstruse matters). The factional interests and tactics are each anatomised, none are endorsed, and sometimes the 'drama' feels more like a swift and dispassionate exposition of the pragmatics of criminal procedure. It is ironic, therefore, that *Janus* has been promoted (for example, Minister for Justice Duncan Kerr on the ABC's Law Report) as a potential catalyst to law reform, a latter-day *Scales of Justice*. The system's whirring, unpredictable, error-ridden complexity as portrayed in the series has the contrary effect of preventing the isolation of particular problems for public scrutiny. The possibility of police brutality exists, as does the possibility of jury sabotage; but neither is confirmed. The *Janus* system contains many defects, but the defects are presented as *part of the system*, not invitations to law reform or inquiry. With the exception of the clumsily portrayed Janus Committee itself (modelled on Victorian magistrate Linda Dessau's Pegasus Task Force) and its attempts to improve the committal stage of criminal prosecution, *Janus* could hardly be said to be scandalised in its tone. The Roman god Janus, with one face looking forward and the other backwards, becomes an image not of circumspect progress, but one of ambivalence or confusion.