

TO BE FRANC

Franc Violi has been told he was too short, too ethnic, too Italian, not Italian enough - but he lives in hope that as Australia matures, so will the industry's approach to casting.

In 1981, I made the decision to become an actor and, in one way, shape, or another, I've managed a handful of gigs every year since.

No small achievement, given that most of the people that started around the same time as me had retired by the age of 20.

I'm now 44 and while I've lived with the faith that stereotyped casting would become less of an issue as this beautiful country of ours matured I'm not so sure that it has.

In my early years, I continued with my studies in the craft of stage acting in a practical environment and, as I became more self-assured, went in pursuit of representation. Young, fresh, enthusiastic - and somewhat naïve - I found the idea of pursuing a creative profession very liberating. Until, that is, my first experience with a prominent South Australian casting consultant. "You're too short and ethnic to be an actor," she said. Bugger! I thought. At five-foot-eight, I tower above Danny DeVito. It was time to leave Adelaide and explore the other states. Maybe height wouldn't be an issue in Sydney or Melbourne. In the end, however, the frustration began to weigh heavily. All I wanted to do was perform. I tried angle after angle: contact lenses; hair streaks; I changed my surname to something more Anglo-Saxon (Laughton it was from memory - well, it worked for that talented fat bastard who played Henry VIII in England, and I still had a full head of hair. Yes, Laughton it was - for all of two weeks).

I remember going to Crawford's in Melbourne for a casting in the mid-eighties. A young casting assistant commented on what beautiful blue eyes I had and I thought: "That's good, I'm either going to get laid or get cast." "Thank you," I replied, trying not to blink from the burning sensation caused by the prototype blue contact lenses that had cost me \$200 bucks. I told fibs about my background: Mum was Irish, Dad was Italian. Dad was Welsh, Mum was French. I was prepared to be whatever they thought they wanted.

Even the agents over the years, with their reverse

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psychology, (to make you feel better about yourself): "Sorry Franc, you were too Italian. Sorry Franc you weren't Italian enough, too short, too tall, too young, too old, too fat, too thin..."

One consultant even had the gall to call up my agent and asked for a "Franc type". "Why don't you just get Franc?" my agent asked.

"He's just not quite Franc enough," was her reply.

But who and what was this faceless demon stopping me from being cast? Was it the media moguls sending out memos stating that no person or persons of ethnic background or diversity will be given a job above a homegrown performer?

Was it the networks calling the shots? Was it the consultants playing it safe and generic? Was it that the agents that represented me had mostly resigned themselves to the fact that, that's just the way it is? Was it the writers? Was it the directors? Was it a tribe of albino public servants with an aversion to anything darker than light brown running the government funding bodies?

Who was it that wasn't prepared to break convention or explore other possibilities?

From my own experiences, and from conversations with a handful of Australian actors whose parents were immigrants, I believe the standard and volume of work on offer has done much to fuel the sense of bigotry that has led many to early retirement. It's sad to think how many incredible talents may have evolved in a different environment. So, what stereotypes have I played over the years? A hit man in Rafferty's Rules. A deli owner in a Cadbury's ad. A dealer's bagman in Blue Murder. I was Ivan Milat twice, once for 60 minutes and recently for Crimes That Shook the World. A cab driver in A Country Practice. An Italian waiter in a Macleans toothpaste ad. A chauffeur in a Ford Fairlane commercial. A cop in The Oyster Farmer (which was a nice change). Santa Clause and Aussie Bob Trimboli (now that's just weird!). But wait! Then there was a change of fortune as a presenter for Navy training videos. It felt good to finally be accepted as a real Australian, even if I am anti-war. But, did I get the gig because I was right for it, or because nobody else wanted it? Mmm...that's a toughie!

Recently, there was a corporate video playing a smoking Joe Private Eye. Is that character acting or stereotypical casting? I used an American accent so it probably doesn't count. Although, having spent some time in the US ethnicity never seemed to be the problem the work permit was.

Recently, I was invited by my son's class to share my experiences as an actor. As I looked across the room I thought how wonderful and different they all looked. Different! That's a good thing right?
Franc Violi is a New South Wales based performer.

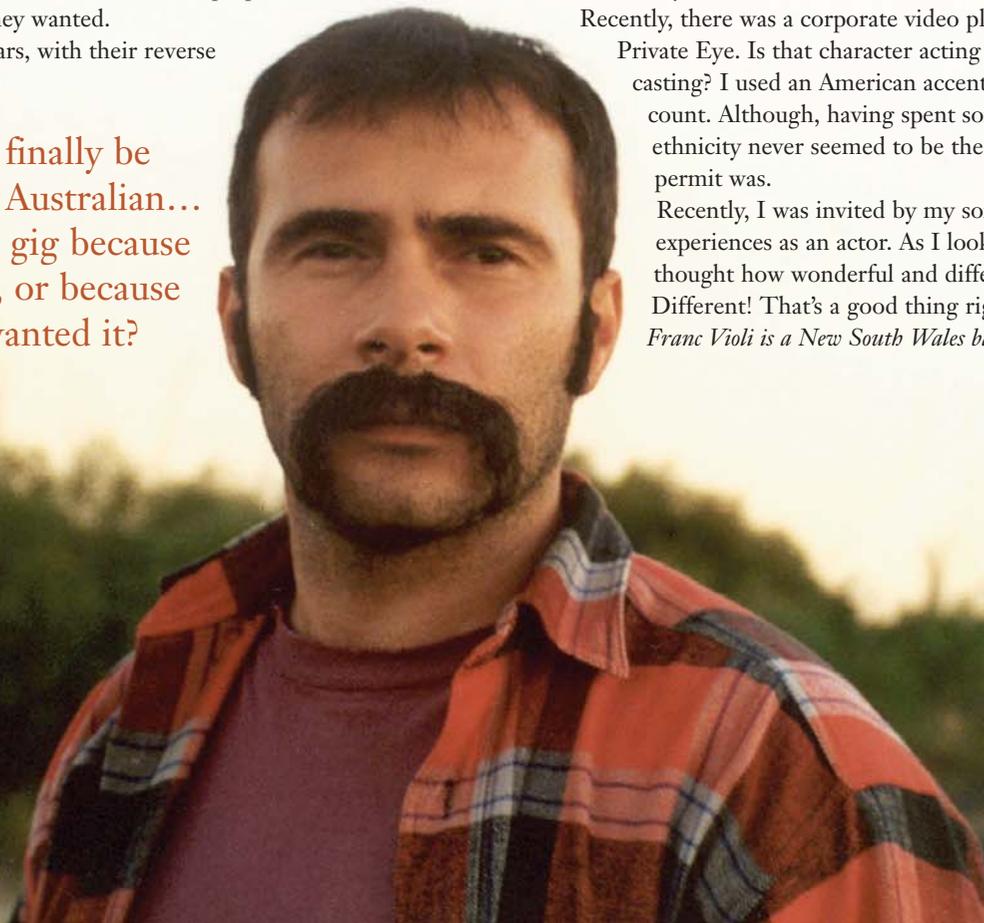


Photo: Franc Violi as Ivan Milat