

Clive James: a 'calculating poseur' who made us think, and laugh

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The last time I saw Clive on TV was an interview with Kerry O'Brien several years ago, filmed in Britain when he was obviously very ill. Frail as he was, the critic, poet and TV star — The New Yorker magazine once called him “a brilliant bunch of guys” — rallied and out poured the stories and reflections.

The best line was the last. Asked how he would like to be remembered, he said: “I won't be buying a ticket to Switzerland so I can book into some clinic and pay people to put me into a long, deep sleep,” he said. “I can get that from television here.”

Well, no one ever went to sleep when he was on TV. And for several decades he was on a lot. He started as a TV critic for The Observer in 1972, where he found a comedic way of striking a balance between the critic as critic and the critic as viewer. Fellow critic Sheridan Morley famously said “he made the programs more enjoyable to read about than they could ever be to watch”.

But mainstream success came with his own programs such as Clive James on Television in 1982, followed by Saturday Night Clive and Saturday Night Clive on Sunday. They were witty and droll and, while his career ended at the turn of the century, he anticipated the internet age of streaming and podcasts by setting up clivejames.com, “the world's first personal multimedia website of its kind”.

He said radio, particularly the great Sydney quiz show host Jack Davey who James listened to when he was a boy, introduced him to the kind of wordplay, “essentially the interplay of the expected and the unexpected, and therefore a matter of construction far more complex than a

mere pun", that he later excelled in as both critic and performer on the telly. He loved the way Davey could think "like lightning on his feet" and James practised the same kind of kinetic presentation.

He was good at the verbal improvisation that eludes most TV presenters, picking up on unexpected things, a knack that can't be scripted. "You have to look up from the page and snatch the opportunity out of the air," he said.

He also suggested that Davey, with his spontaneous wit, introduced him to what he called "the educated joke" which he said became his stock in trade as a TV presenter. It was a Davey joke about actress Mercedes McCambridge, which he said went over his head like a Frisbee but its flight delighted him. "I would like to think that it was the thing I did on television, some of the time anyway," he wrote. "But most of the credit I got was just for having my face there."

He once described himself as "some calculating poseur, who will do anything to display his - erudition, while simultaneously plunging ruthlessly downmarket in search of viewers". How anyone could successfully do both things at once, he suggested, was hard to fathom, but he did it with enormous skill, especially in his TV writing.

Of his TV criticism, he said: "I must strive to express myself in as unadorned a way as possible while being entertaining enough to ram home the message that their lives will be blighted if they don't see the show." He added, "If the flyer is sometimes garish, for the circus I make no excuse."

He wrote his criticism with what in a different context he once described as "the easy-seeming colloquial snap", always enamoured of "the immediacy, the quotability, and, of course, the brevity, of the periodical article written to a tight deadline".

He's still an inspiration to anyone writing for a living; especially anyone writing about TV at a time when, in some circles, there are still doubts about its legitimacy.

A sneering out-of-hand dismissal of TV is the one cultural prejudice that can be readily - delivered without inverted commas. But as James said as a critic, "I went for the popular and every time I suspected the creative energies might be there."

There was always a smile in whatever he wrote and it was always there when he performed, too, his face hinting at a certain happy bemusement that he had ended up where he found himself, and that his being there struck him as slightly fraudulent.

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Actor, director, producer and writer, Graeme Blundell has been associated with many pivotal moments in Australian theatre, film and television. He has directed over 100 plays, acted in about the same number, an... [Read more](#)

