



From Phillip to Mabo

EVEN at the menopausal, mid-life crisis age it is, Australian television still has the capacity to surprise us and bust out with something worthwhile.

Starting on SBS tomorrow night is the most ambitious series to be made in this country. From Arthur Phillip to Mabo, two centuries of shared history have been distilled into seven episodes of lyrical, evocative television. I'd also describe it as important but I don't want to scare you off.

First Australians is this country's history like you've never seen it.

"We wanted to put indigenous people back in the frame," is how co-producer Rachel Perkins puts it.

An award-winning filmmaker and the daughter of late political activist Charles Perkins, she also wrote the script, with acclaimed writer Louis Nowra, and directed most of the episodes. But she says even she learned things making the series. "I grew up with a bit

of it but I didn't realise how much I didn't know."

It took her and producer Darren Dale — and a team of collaborators — seven years of slog to bring the project to TV.

Seven years of interviews, sifting through archives, court documents, paintings, letters... If *First Australians* reminds you of Ken Burns's groundbreaking American documentary *The Civil War* and the way it avoided twee historical reenactments and instead created the story through personal correspondence and photographs, there's a reason for that. "We met Ken and we drew heavily on his work. Unashamedly," Perkins says. "He told us that that was a good way to do it and we took that on board. For this sort of material it has an authenticity to it that dramatisation lacks."

Hard to believe, but Perkins says they were actually worried there might not be enough there to keep the viewer hooked. "We were terrified it

wasn't going to be dramatic enough. In the early episodes, we use the material chronologically so we don't have any photos until the last of the third episode. It's terrifying to base a TV program on little watercolour sketches, it's very tricky, but we wanted to use images from that period... we were very disciplined because we wanted it to be authentic but we've been in a panic, and will be until it goes to air, about whether it sustains the viewer."

Of the 100 people interviewed for the series, just two pulled out, Perkins says. "One thought we'd gotten things wrong and thought I'd used my personal family alliances to sway content.

"We really want people to be happy with this work, though, so even those two were devastating but we have to stand by our approach. Ultimately, we're doing our version."

It is a dazzling, absorbing piece of work, full of details both good and bad. (Good: the

tentative, promising early relationship between indigenous people and the First Fleet. Bad: the vandalism of Eddie Mabo's tombstone.)

"We didn't want to do anything that made anyone feel awful, even though there's things for people to feel awful about," Perkins says.

"It's easy to sit here and judge people like Neville (Bonner) and police officers. We weren't there at the time.

"We want it to speak to people emotionally and move them. We didn't want to do what others had done, and extract the white experience out of it and tell the Aboriginal and Islander version, because that's not how history in this country has happened."

And without one minute of it having yet gone to air, Perkins is certain what the documentary's legacy will be. "It will go into schools, I'm absolutely positive," she says. "For the next 20 years kids will have to watch it. It'll drive them mad."

