

Why Colette Mann will work until her last day

It's been 49 years since actor Colette Mann made her theatrical debut. Still working at 70, the Aussie veteran fires up about why she thinks complaints of a lack of roles for women is an excuse

Even though I have a strange body shape, I started off as a dancer. I really wanted to be a ballerina, but unfortunately when I got to *pas de deux* [dance duet] class with boys, I was standing in the corner while they lifted all the wishbone girls. I decided to do something else. One of my ballet teachers thought I was quite good at acting, so my mother enrolled me in classes.

In 1971, I auditioned for the original company of the musical *Godspell* and I got in. The rest, as they say, is "theatrical history". I've basically worked as an actor ever since 1971.

My first television role was a telemovie for the ABC in 1974 called *The Champion*. I played [actor] John Jarratt's girlfriend and on the first day on set I had to get into bed with him and have sex – that was the very first day. I was pretty taken aback by it. I wasn't a virgin, but I wasn't really out there "doing it" and so... look, he was an absolute gentleman. I remember it being really scary and thinking I'd lose the job. I've never seen it back, thank god, but apparently I was all right in it.

I've been playing bartender Sheila Canning in *Neighbours* since 2012, and this is the longest I've done any job. In the twilight of my career, it's a great gig to have because I get to turn up every day and act, which is what I'm trying to do. I don't have to work in a real bar, which I couldn't because I'm terrible at it. I say to the prop guys, "I've been an actor my whole life. I've never had to be a bar person," and they're like, "Oh god, don't give her a prop, she's terrible." There are some shows on Australian television that

you think, "Oh, I'd love to do that," and *Neighbours* is one of those for me.

One of my most memorable roles was as Doreen on *Prisoner*. I do get a little irritated now as an older woman when I hear young actresses saying, "There are no roles for women," or "We're just breaking through with roles for women." We started shooting *Prisoner* in 1978 and there were 16 women, and we were all leads. We got to do fights and all sorts of storylines. Looking at it now, it has aged

and we all have, too. It's spawned *Wentworth* which is of a very high standard. So I get tired when I hear people whining about there not being enough roles for women. I think sometimes we look for excuses that are not really there.

I'm told, "You were one of the lucky ones," but I never had problems getting roles.

And here I am, at this hideous age I'm about to turn, working full-time, playing a good character in a television series.

Not many women my age are still working 10 hours a day, every day. My mother was sitting at home knitting and watching television when she was my age, but I couldn't imagine doing that. It's funny because I'm at that age now where people are starting to die around me. I've got friends who ask "Why don't you retire?" And I say, "Oh, why don't you just ask me to lie down in a coffin and die?" I was told once by a psychic I will live until I am 96, and I will be working right up until my last day. I'm hanging on to that. ★ *Neighbours* screens 6.30pm, Monday to Friday, on 10 Peach.



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”
NICHOLAS FONSECA,
DEPUTY EDITOR

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