

## Janet Argall

Age — 24

### Producer's Assistant, Countdown

Deep in the bowels of the ABC's Melbourne studios, the dimly lit control room of Studio 31 is buzzing with activity. People are hunched intently over a gigantic console full of switches and levers, their eyes glued to a bewildering bank of television monitors in front of them as the *Countdown* opening sequence unfolds.

"Standby on the floor" calls the producer's assistant, Janet Argall, from her seat at the console. A microphone relays her instructions down to the headphones of the cameramen in the studio below.

Through the window panes fitted underneath the TV monitors you can see into the studio below where this episode's hosts, Molly and Elton John, are seated on a tiny wooden set surrounded by an excited audience. They are all poised, waiting for their cues.

With a stop watch in her hand, Janet begins the count down "10, 9, 8..."

Suddenly the studio is ablaze with lights and Molly and Elton spring to life and begin to chat. Upstairs, Janet gazes intently at her stopwatch timing their chatter and firing off directives to the cameramen. Meanwhile, seated next to her, the director is simultaneously firing off his own instructions, their two voices mingling in the control room with the sounds from the studio below, while the monitors continue to flicker in front of them.

To the outsider, it looks like organised mayhem. The atmosphere is charged with adrenalin as everyone gives their complete concentration to the split-second timing of the show.

Janet's job as the producer's assistant is to instruct the cameramen and make sure the show runs on time. And it requires unswerving concentration in spite of all the distractions around her.

"It's terrifying if you do drift off and lose concentration," Janet told me later. "You've really got to make sure your mind is constantly on it."

Meanwhile, downstairs, Elton and Molly are sharing a joke and Molly, chiding Elton, places his hand on Elton's knee. Elton, still laughing, places his hand on top of Molly's.

Suddenly the phone in the control room rings shrilly. Janet quickly answers it and passes it to the director. It's the producer on the line and the director hastily relays his message to

the floor crew: "Tell Molly and Elton to keep their hands off each other. We don't want them putting their hands on each others' knees again!" There's a brief moment of concern in the control room about the incident but the show keeps rolling... with film clips by Queen, Nena and Duran Duran.

Sandii And The Sunsets are next and they perform their single "Sticky Music" live in the studio as they had rehearsed many times earlier in the day. Janet pours over a lyric sheet on which the director's camera angles are scrawled in front of the verses.

"Standby camera one, camera three next," she calls. She hums along as she follows the lyric sheet. A few lines further, she calls "Standby camera three, two next..."

At the same time the director is calling out other instructions. "Can you tell Molly that in 'Humdrum' he's only got a minute and a bit of speaking time so can he keep his links (introductions) short?"

A few clips later Janet starts to count down "30 thrives to Molly, stand by". Then "10,9,8..."

Molly launches nervously into "Humdrum", stumbling over his opening words. Even after 10 years, he

is still not at ease in front of the camera. As he chats on about the week's record news, it becomes increasingly apparent that he's not going to finish within a minute and the tight scheduling of the program is thrown out.

Upstairs Janet is staring at her stopwatch again. "Tch Tch," she mutters shaking her head and makes some hasty time alterations on her calculator.

The show continues at a frantic pace until finally the Top 10 whizzes around and it's all over. There's a visible sigh in the control room as the crew relax — another show is over and everything has gone smoothly. The director stands up and congratulates everyone for a job well done.

"It still amazes me sometimes that we get out the product we do in the limited time we have each week," Janet reflected afterwards in one of the dressing rooms.

Certainly if you're prone to stress, a job on *Countdown* is not recommended. But Janet, 24, thrives on the pace. "When I first went into the studio it was terrifying because there were so many things going on. You've got 15 monitors and you're just overawed by this vision. But it's a matter of getting used to it and feeling comfortable there."

Janet joined the *Countdown* team two years ago, after working as a producer's assistant in other departments of the ABC and she clearly loves her job.

"In a lot of ways, four days out of five the job is basically secretarial and that can be very mundane. But the Friday (when *Countdown* is pre-recorded) is usually a culmination of all the hard work and that makes it all worth it.

"The producer and director are the creative force behind it, packaging the program and the visual side of the show. Then I co-ordinate it, making sure the artists know what time they're called for, making sure the equipment is there, typing the scripts and making sure that everybody knows what's going on.

"It's my job to make sure the show runs out on time which, with an element like Ian Meldrum, can be very difficult — but he's actually quite good now, he takes direction really well. He's temperamental but he's a delight to work with.

"When the international guests come out, Ian opens his house to these people and it's such a beautiful house and he's such a lovely host. He goes out of his way to entertain them. He has them around for dinner and they just totally unwind. It's amazing to see that side of them and I don't think they've ever met anyone like him, really.

"When I first started I was really in awe of the bands that came in and it took me about 12 months in the job to relax around them," Janet recalled.

"But I have to go into their dressing rooms and make sure they're settled and comfortable and usually find that they're the nicest people you could possibly ever meet."

One of the funniest incidents Janet can recall involved Duran Duran and a group of their fans.

"We had all five of them in the dressing room and they had a plate of sandwiches which they hadn't eaten. We thought the fans would love it — and it was pretty tacky — but we took a bite out of a couple of them then took them out to the fans and I've never seen a plate of sandwiches demolished so quickly!

"We were working until pretty late and Duran Duran had gone five hours ago but the fans sat out in the rain just for a possible glimpse!

"In a way, you become a mini-celebrity just because you've had contact with them.

"I suppose you do get blase about it. But I never did follow bands, I spent my teenage years just being into movies. But," she conceded "I think any kid dreams of getting into television and that's something I wanted to do, too. It's a good medium."

Janet's entry into the world of television was quite a stroke of luck.

"I did a secretarial course when I was 15. My father worked at the ABC and suggested I try them for a job. When I walked in to make my application, the girl at the front desk happened to resign five minutes earlier!

"The good thing about the ABC is that they tend to nurture people and they hold courses to train you in various jobs. Within five months they ran a producers' assistants course and, thankfully, I was selected.

"Then I did about four years in drama and lots of odds and ends before they put me on *Countdown* which initially caused a bit of a problem because of my age. I was 22 and they thought all I'd want to do was go around and grab the stars and get their autographs which I found really annoying because I had no intention of doing that."

Now, Janet feels totally at home in her job and reluctantly, is about to leave it.

"They have this turnover system within the ABC and they don't like to leave you on a show for too long. But I would like to go further. I definitely don't want to be a producer's assistant forever so I hope I can further my career within the ABC because I like the system and I like the way it works."

But despite Janet's personal ambitions, she is not looking forward to leaving *Countdown*. "It is sad because if you find something you really love and think suits you, it's nice to stick around for a little while." ★

