

MICHEL LAWRENCE

Lawrence of Suburbia

After a series of career moves including journalism, pet rock launching and band manager for The Bushwackers, Mattingly creative director Michel Lawrence is determined that advertising is the way to go. He takes time out from a busy schedule to talk to Mark Miller.

Michel Lawrence keeps looking at his watch. He's just finished hosting the latest Melbourne Art Directors' Club lunch and he's squeezed this interview in before a 3.30pm meeting back at the agency. He's sorry he couldn't make it yesterday but there was this pressing presentation and . . .

Somehow, he manages to stay calm. Infuriatingly calm. So-calm-you-wonder-how-he-does-it calm. But he's pretty relaxed about it.

Theoretically, his life has enough stimulus to create an adrenalin surge big enough to launch the Challenger space shuttle. But he manages to keep his (very stylishly enhanced) feet on the ground.

As creative director of one of Australia's biggest agencies, he has 50 creative egos to soothe and coax. As president of the MADC, he has had a not dissimilar role to perform on its membership. As a family man, he can relax with only the demands of seven-year-old twins to bother him.

Mattingly as an agency has been dubbed in some circles a sweat shop. Certainly, from the early hours of the

day, the place is busy, "a hive of activity". The impending shift to the Pelaco building, with all the complications of moving, makes it seem doubly so.

But Lawrence does not agree with the sweat shop tag. "I think it's a derogatory term," he says. "And I don't think it's a sweat shop. It's certainly the hardest working agency in Australia and the people enjoy hard work."

"The Pelaco building will be an enormous morale boost. It's a great facility and as an environment I think it will be the best in Australia."

He's been nicknamed Lawrence of Suburbia, launching the drive of thousands of catalogues into mailboxes across the land. Where others may once have laughed or sneered at the analogy, or at the possibility of applying creative thought to retail, of making catalogues something more than an excuse for chopping down more trees, now they try to mimic the style.

"A lot of agencies still have a ghetto mentality towards retail," he says. "They stick it down the back and give it to people you wouldn't give a job to. Well, we don't. We get our best people

to work on it."

It's another tag that doesn't fit. Mattingly was once thought of exclusively as the retail agency. The big agency that didn't win awards. But then Mattingly started turning up in the finalists at FACTS, AWARD, MADC and the Caxtons, then the New York and London International TV awards, then a gold in New York for the bicycle awareness campaign for the Road Traffic Authority. Most recently it was a silver and four bronze awards at the MADC awards. Mattingly as a creative agency isn't funny any more.

Add to that an impressive list of creative talent that has been lured to Mattingly — Myles Pederson (ex-Dancer Fitzgerald Sample), Nigel Dawson (ex-D'Arcy Masius Benton & Bowles and Foote Cone & Belding), Keith Lewin (was a partner in his own London agency) and Bruce Knaie (ex-Ogilvy & Mather) among them — and the myth is finally laid to rest.

At the moment there are five senior teams and each of them is a creative director in their own right — "It's working really well," Lawrence says.

"David Mattingly gives me a very

free rein. When I arrived he said: 'It's yours son, fix it.'"

Lawrence was lured to the agency after the DMB&B merger, when Mattingly was billing about \$65m. Mike Bollen (now a partner in US Advertising) was cd on Myer and Lawrence was given control of everything but Myer. Three months later Bollen left and Lawrence found himself running the whole show.

"I could sniff that this place was bubbling," he said. "I thought that with the right mix of people it could be enormously successful."

The creative department had a staff of 20, of which Lawrence admits there are not too many left two years later.

"I thought the only way I'm going to make any stamp is to have the best people you can," he says. "So simply it was a matter of bringing in the best people I could."

"In those days it was very much a retail shop. I always believe that every agency should have a strong retail base along with packaged goods. Retail is so good because it is constant. No small agency can start with big package clients."

Lawrence's own background had served him well. After starting the La Trobe University student newspaper *Rabellie* he moved into full-time journalism at *The Australian*, progressing to state political roundsman. Had it not been for Dick Hamer, he might still be there and never have learnt to sell pet rocks, organise a European tour for an electric bush band or publish a skateboard magazine. He might not even have become Mattingly's cd.

"Adrian Deamer was the editor of *The Australian* then and it was at its best," he says. "But I guess I just got burnt out with the internal politics and I was suffering terminal boredom with Dick Hamer."

Fate introduced him to Bill Burrows, fresh out of art school, and the pair decided they could set up shop together and "somehow do pr and below-the-line advertising — we were very naive and green".

During that period, Lawrence also got into publishing with two sports magazines — *Sticks* for skateboarders and *Backdoor* for surfers. Lawrence says he was part of the "second-wave" of skateboard enthusiasts but admits the thought of riding one now frightens him.

Another fad that caught his attention was pet rocks and he and Burrows were responsible for their launch in Australia. The fact they were the creation of an American advertising copywriter began to fire Lawrence's interest in the industry.

But yet another fad was to divert his intention — though ultimately it would lead him back to advertising. Bush music was at its height of popularity in the mid-'70s and The Bushwackers, the band which blended tra-



Michel Lawrence: "Success has 1000 fathers and failure is an orphan. But whatever you do, you're trying your hardest to win."

ditional Australian bush ballads with electric guitars, was at the forefront of the movement. From handling their pr, Lawrence joined the band as manager for a two-year European tour. It was to prove an invaluable lesson in handling creative egos under stress.

"Living on the road with a band was a traumatic experience," he says. "They were eight different characters and they all had big fragile egos. But it's like playing football — you just have to read the people."

It was while in England that the greater possibilities of advertising became apparent.

"Catching a bus from Heathrow airport into London you can see all these billboards — some of them are like works of art," he says. "It's much more a part of the culture over there, it revolves around the use of the language."

"Australia doesn't have the same intellectual love of language — we are far more direct and we don't have the ability to cope with the cleverness of the language."

On his return, determined that advertising was the way to go, he again teamed with Burrows, who had been working at Ogilvy & Mather. Again green but again able to survive and thrive, they eventually teamed with Ed Doble (now managing director of Mattingly) to open Burrows Doble Lawrence.

Lawrence is proud of the creative impression BDL made in work for Control Data, Eastcoast, Mainland Cheese and ICI. Obviously others were impressed too, and Masius bought in for a 25% share. Eventually after the formation of DMB&B, BDL sold up completely. Lawrence stayed two months before being headhunted by David Mattingly.

Not content with running one of the largest creative departments in Australia, Lawrence has also spent the past year as president of the MADC.

It's been a year when the Melbourne creative community could sit up and take notice of what its club was doing for them — the successful live telecast of the D&AD Awards from London, which for the first time linked all the creative clubs around Australia for one event; the recent MADC awards night and the production of the award book, available on the night.

"It's been a very good year," he says. "The year before had been unfortunate for the committee. But you can see what can happen when you have a good bunch of people and get the support happening."

But he is also aware of the criticisms and is not about to back away from them. At this year's MADC awards, community service dominated and some people were not happy.

"I think the group has to tighten up

on how we allow people to enter awards and we don't have to give as much leeway in entering ads in multiple categories," he says. Despite this, he acknowledges he gave the president's award to a community service commercial.

"If a piece is very good it should be rewarded," he says. "I gave that award because I thought it was the best piece."

"I had people ringing me up the night before and warning me not to give it to Leonardi & Curtis. It's sheer arrogance and jealousy of an agency which has had a lot of success with community service," he says.

Through it all, Lawrence of Suburbia sails calmly. Ask him how he copes and you get a sporting analogy — they litter his conversation and you can surmise his whole philosophy is very sportsmanlike. Like a good punter, he believes in taking a chance on himself and others. And if he hasn't always followed the rules, it's probably because he doesn't have the time to read them.

"I often liken it (being cd) to playing football," he says. "If ever the team fails, the coach is the one who gets kicked and perhaps you share the highs less. There's a saying that success has 1000 fathers and failure is an orphan. But whatever you do, you're trying your hardest to win." □