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Life

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**Jokers in the pack:
The Jacobsons and
other comics on what
makes Australia laugh**

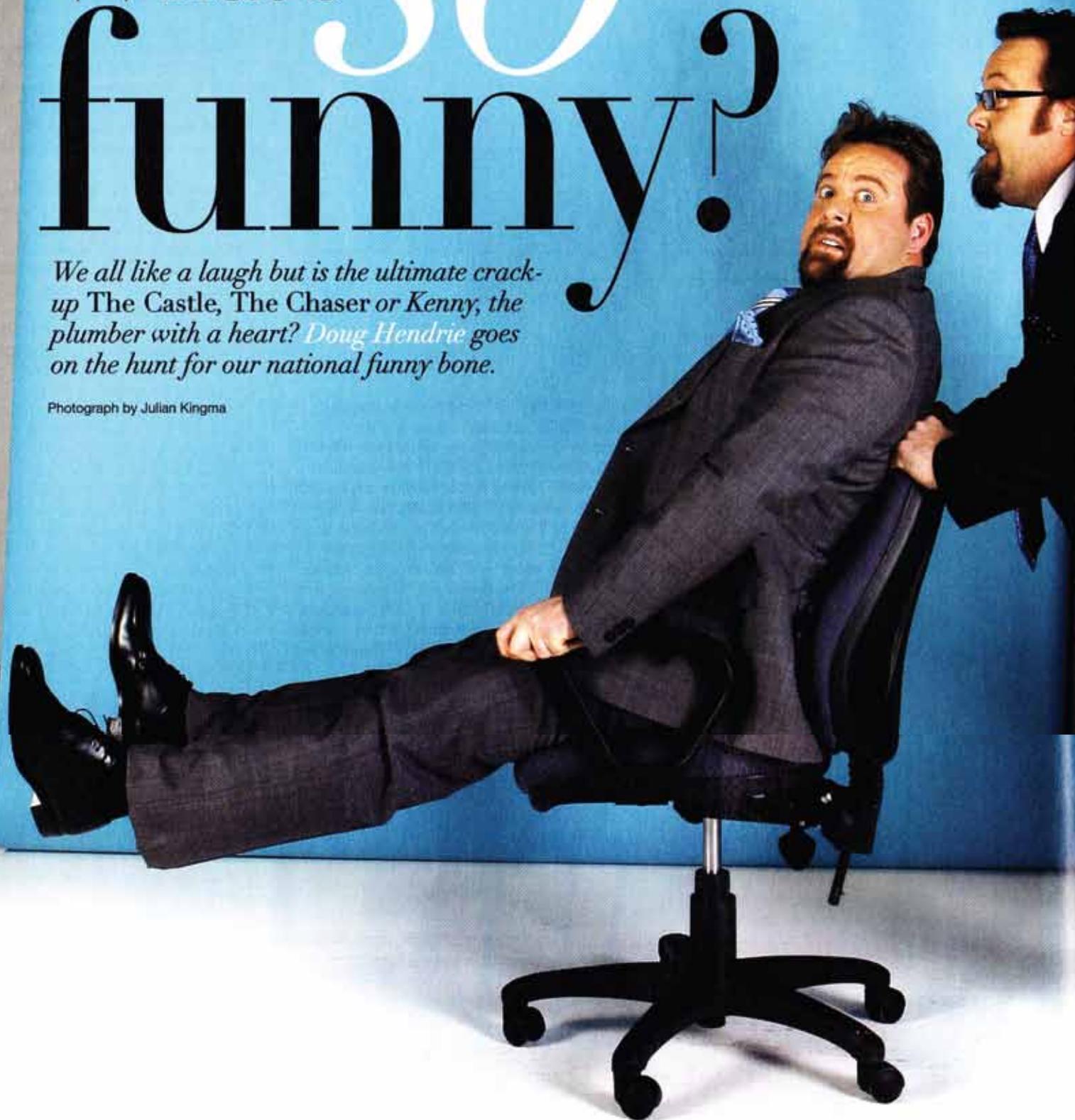
Empty nests: Is this the
end of the nuclear family?

Tobie Puttock's
spring barbecue

What's *SO* funny?

We all like a laugh but is the ultimate crack-up The Castle, The Chaser or Kenny, the plumber with a heart? Doug Hendrie goes on the hunt for our national funny bone.

Photograph by Julian Kingma





Corinne Grant does not find the iconic Australian movie *The Castle* the least bit funny. Sacrilege! Un-Australian! "Look, being working-class myself, I found it condescending," says the comedian and panellist on now-defunct *The Glass House*. "The idea of the Aussie battler goes back to *Dad & Dave* but they don't exist any more. John Howard won an election by crapping on about battlers but you're not a battler if you're having trouble paying off a \$25,000 plasma TV. You're an idiot."

If a comedy deemed too Australian to crack the US market can't raise a laugh from Grant, what hope is there of pinning down the national sense of humour? How do you make a local laugh?

Television, radio and stand-up star Dave Hughes's response is typical. "We always try to take the piss out of anyone who thinks they are important, and that is what I love," he says. "We're good at being self-deprecating. It pervades our consciousness. We are good at seeing the ridiculousness of ego."

According to Mikey Robins, *Good News Week* team captain and Vega radio host. "Everyone knows they are fair game, from polities to Bindi Irwin. "What makes us laugh is what connects us as a society. When you strip away pomposity and silliness ... that is where our humour lies."

Chaser member Chris Taylor believes Aussies have a "healthy disrespect and distrust of authority", providing fertile ground for his team's gung-ho brand of pranks and nose tweaking. Last year, team member Chas Licciardello posed as Osama bin Laden during Sydney's largest-ever police operation.

Tim Ross, one half of veteran radio duo Merrick and Rosso, says Aussies are experts at ribbing their mates. "The funniest people you know are your

mates," he says. Ross remembers cajoling Merrick Watts into hitting a large red button marked "Do not press" and shutting down Triple J radio station for a heart-stopping minute in 2000, sending producers into a frenzy. The incident didn't dirt the larrikin duo's success, with more than a decade of on-air Aussie banter behind them. "People relate to the comedy we do because it's just a couple of mates taking the piss," says Watts. "Our humour is often branded as very Aussie as a result."

Dave Hughes says honesty is a vital component of Australian comedy. "I like it when people say things I can relate to," he says. "Honesty is what I strive for in my comedy." The seasoned comic says life's ridiculousness provides him with a steady stream of material. "My wife had a coffee with a lesbian friend this morning and as she was coming home, she started singing *I Kissed A Girl*. It wasn't on the radio."

Watts is a believer, too: "I enjoy honest comedy – you know, if you think you've had a bad day, cop mine – over put-down humour, where people think they are better than their audience. What Rosso and I really love is finding an average person and making them a champ."

Australian mockery is gentler than that offered up by American TV personalities such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, or the excruciating satire of British shows such as *The Office*. Colbert famously ridiculed US President George Bush to his face at the televised 2006 White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, using the persona of a conservative commentator to send up the unpopular president. "I stand by this man," said Colbert. "I stand by this man because he stands for things. Not only for things, he stands on things. Things like aircraft carriers and rubble and recently flooded city squares." →

WHAT KENNY DID NEXT

It's little wonder the Jacobson brothers, Shane and Clayton (pictured), make a living working together in comedy. To see them over lunch, reliving practical jokes, their careers as the creators of the Kenny phenomenon appear to be a continuation of their laugh-filled upbringing in Avondale Heights, a working-class suburb in Melbourne's west.

"I came home once and the house was on fire," says Clayton, 44. "Or at least I thought it was. Smoke was billowing out of the doors. I panicked, opened up the door, couldn't see anything. Then I thought, 'This smoke smells kind of sweet...'" At the time, Shane worked at a lighting and events company that staged rock concerts. "It was theatrical smoke from a smoke machine," says Clayton.

But the jokes were not always on each other. "Our sister would have [friends over for] sleepovers," explains Shane, 38. "It was like an episode of *The Brady Bunch*. We would have to give up our room. We did give it up but not without a fight. Clay would set up speakers." Clayton, then 15 and a budding filmmaker, would unleash spooky music from his album of sound effects through the speakers, with the desired effect on the terrified 12-year-old girls.

Now, the Jacobsons have another, more lucrative way of getting laughs – and his name is Kenny. The good-natured plumber and sanitation expert, played by Shane, charmed the world two years ago in the eponymous movie written by both brothers and directed by Clayton. (continued on page 17)

Why don't Australian comics go for the jugular? Jon Casimir, co-creator of the ABC hit *The Gruen Transfer*, believes that for all our good-natured mudslinging, Australians don't like being mocked personally. "Australians love to think of themselves as people who can take a joke. I reckon we are actually thin-skinned and quick to take offence. We don't mind being self-deprecating but we don't like being sent up."

Casimir says we are squeamish if vicious satire strikes too close to home. "It's OK when attacking a politician or a brainless celeb but Australians are uncomfortable if the anger or passion that drives satire gets too close to the surface. They hate the possibility that it might not be fair." An example? He offers beloved Aussie sitcom-cum-parody *Kath & Kim*. "You can send up bogans, as long as you are affectionate, as long as they are heroes in the end."

One reason for that might be Australia's restrictions on free speech, says Corinne Grant. "If we weren't bound by defamation laws, we would be just as biting. When we were doing *The Glass House*, we had a team of lawyers watching every bloody word that came out of our mouths to make sure that we mentioned the ALP as many times as the Liberals. That doesn't happen on American shows."

Chris Taylor says comedy is now more universal, less parochial. "In the English-speaking world, comedy has become globalised, and a show like *Summer Heights High* owes as big a debt to American work like Christopher Guest's [such as *Spinal Tap*] as it does to British work like *The Office*. All three countries are painting from the same palette these days but, frustratingly, England and the US are still coming up with better results."

Grant is unconvinced. She believes Aussie comics no longer need to look wistfully at what is happening in the US and UK. "We are influenced by our own body of work now. You'd be hard-pressed to find a TV host these days who hasn't learned something from Graham Kennedy."

Ted Robinson is the producer of a string of Australian TV comedy shows, from the Alvin Purple spin-off of the 1970s and the *Gillies Report* to *The Glass House* and *Good News Week*. After last month's Montreal International Comedy Festival, Robinson returned with a surge of pride for our home-grown comics.

"What delighted me most were the Australian performers," he says. "There were so many boring middle-class white stand-ups from America doing cats versus dogs and aren't supermarkets weird, and then you had [Tasmanian newcomer] Hannah Gadsby, who was breathtakingly refreshing and idiosyncratic." Gadsby's deliciously awkward stage presence is coupled with a very Australian streak of self-deprecation and produces jokes such as: "My name's Hannah. That's a palindrome. My entire family have palindromic names. Mum. Dad. Nan. Pop. And my brother, Kayak."

But Merrick Watts believes Australian humour is a hybrid of British and American. "That's why Australia is going to struggle to crack either market or it's just about to happen. We are at the juncture – we can do cutting, cerebral UK humour or the frenetic American humour."

And what about fashion: why do some jokes fade fast while others endure? No one is immune to time passing, as Chris Taylor has learned. "Topical humour ages very quickly, which is a great shame, because it means the work of some of our best comedy writers has a very short shelf life," he says. "The Chaser falls victim to this, too – I tried to watch an old CNN DVD and even I didn't understand half the references."

Older observational humour can date badly or survive intact. Many of Paul Hogan's sketches from the 1970s are wince-worthy today, while "That's not a knife" is timeless. Watts says Hogan's sketches mostly reflected 1970s Australian society. "We were proud to be represented that way at the time but you couldn't do it again. We have different beliefs,

we're far more multicultural and Australian comedy is a smaller realm now."

But Australian isn't dying so much as diversifying. No character in Australian comedy has been more enduring than the ocker larrikin. From *Dad & Dave's* upstart colonial bushmen in need of British polishing, the larrikin found its apotheosis in the '70s as Barry McKenzie, Barry Humphries' tinnie-loving alter ego. Hogan's rogue, Mick Dundee, introduced the larrikin to the world in 1986. Lately, the character has been reincarnated in suburbia in *The Castle* and feminised in *Kath & Kim*.

"As Shazza-type characters start to emerge, you get a challenge to the Bazza type" says Dr Felicity Collins, cinema lecturer at La Trobe University, referring to Magda Szubanski and *Kath & Kim's* Gina Riley and Jane Turner.

The humour once found in racist stereotypes has long gone. Roy Rene and his lecherous vaudeville character, Mo McCackie, were known across Australia during his reign from 1916 to the 1940s, and his influence survives in catchphrases such as "Don't come the raw prawn". But Rene also employed ethnic humour, with an offside on his radio show pretending his face was covered in mud and compared himself to an Aborigine. "No one would do that today," says Ted Robinson.

The tide began to turn with the emergence of "wogsplotation", with comics such as Nick Giannopoulos and Paul Fenech's *Pizza* franchise, which makes playful fun of their communities and other ethnic groups. "It's a popular remaking of the ocker larrikin," says Collins. Hung Le, a Vietnamese-Australian, has also drawn on his own experiences to fuel his comic career. Jon Casimir predicts the next wave will be African-Australian comics, following recent migration patterns.

Australian humour is distilled from our awareness of our place in the world, says Collins. "We aren't a superpower and we aren't a former imperial power, so we have to play off our in-between status. That is why ordinariness works well." →

"We always try to take the piss out of anyone who thinks they are important, and that's what I love."

Dave Hughes (right, with fellow comedian Corinne Grant)



WHAT KENNY DID NEXT *(continued from page 13)*

Now, Kenny is back in *Kenny's World*, a series that investigates the sanitary wonders of the world, from toilet temples in Japan to a loo summit in India. And Shane, fresh from his turn in the stage show *Guys And Dolls*, is happy to be back in the overalls and is unafraid of stereotyping. "No matter what I play, they say, 'Kenny is in *Guys And Dolls*,'" he says. "But without that word 'Kenny' at the start, I wouldn't be in *Guys And Dolls*."

Besides, the Jacobsons are proud of their creation, of Kenny's honest, respectful manner and the veil he has removed from everyone's daily business. "We all enjoy poo humour," Clayton asserts, "even if we are in denial about it."

Kenny has, he says, allowed sanitation to be discussed beyond childhood. "Toilet training is imbued with this great sense of joy, wonderment and achievement," says Clayton. "Then as soon as you've mastered the art, you're told to shut up, put that behind the door and never talk about it again."

But the new series demands a delicate sensibility, a view that hasn't changed since Kenny's first appearance in a short at the St Kilda Film Festival in Melbourne in 2004. "I was convinced Shane was going to witness half an audience walkout," says Clayton, who at the time was filming a commercial in Japan. "I felt if I could tell this man's story without hitting the crass button, then we would have something."

What they got was a character people liked instantly. "I have always seen Kenny as a riff on human decency and dignity," says Clayton. "He understands that even if others aren't going to acknowledge the role he plays in society, he's aware of how important his job is – because when his job goes badly, he has the world coming down on him."

Kenny grew directly from characters in the Jacobson family – Shane and Clayton observing their uncles and father, Ronald Jacobson, now 73,

who still runs a gym in Maribyrnong and who plays Kenny's dad in the movie. There were many laughs but great hardships, too. Ronald's dad owned a carnival, and the family would travel Australia in a truck, offering to put on shows or build fences in exchange for meals. Their grandfather died when Ronald was eight, and their grandmother raised her family alone in Maribyrnong.

"They lived a tough life," says Clayton. "They had nothing at all – a canvas roof over their head. In their street, they were known as 'the tent family', which is why we feed into the notion of knowing what it's like to be looked down upon. The highlight of the year for Dad was when his brothers would go to the local tip and build him a bike for Christmas."

Shane hopes the new series will "reinvigorate the dignity" of those doing unpopular jobs. "There is nothing worse than watching a cleaner walk into an office with their head bowed, not making eye contact with you," says Shane. "They don't do that because they are shy; they do it because they know you don't want to look at them." Shane says Kenny has pride in his trade. "Australia has always been incredibly proud of its working class; this is starting to bring that back."

Kenny has changed the Jacobson's lives, allowing Shane, who's single, to leave his job as an audience warm-up man for shows such as *The Footy Show* – and Clayton, who has two stepchildren, Hannah, 26, and Ali, 23, and a son, Jesse, 12, with partner Vicki – to make films.

The brothers have "a bunch of other stuff" to do, says Shane: possible movies in the US, theatre and movie scripts here – as well as, for Shane, a new comedy opposite Paul Hogan. His brother can't resist. "I haven't told him yet," says Clayton. "I want him to play Kenny in all of them." *Peter Wilmoth*

Kenny's World starts on September 10 on Network Ten.

Ted Robinson says defining a nation's sense of humour is nigh on impossible – "if we knew that, we'd be millionaires" – but what Australians laugh at has changed. "We find the humour in areas and topics where previously we might not have gone," he muses, reminded of a recent period at the ABC where swearing was actively encouraged. "The people running the organisation thought swearing on TV would get us an edgier audience but we got bored with swearing to maintain our youthful cutting-edge credentials."

Robinson believes taboos have been discarded from every aspect of life. "There used to be dressing-room jokes that comedians would never tell on stage but that public-private divide seems to have evaporated," he says. "Comedians can now mine their own frailties and their own inadequacies and get humour from that."

In some ways, open discussion of topics previously confined to close friends or the doctor has made it tougher for comics. "Almost anything goes now and that can make it harder to be funny," says Robinson. "When there are constraints and censorship of language, it is easier to get humour by pushing boundaries. Mavis Bramston [a 1960s satirical character] could make people laugh hysterically by saying the naughty word – poo."

All comedy riffs on old themes, and toilet humour, sex jokes and slapstick are as old as recorded history. The ancient Sumerians laughed at fart jokes almost 4000 years ago, according to research by the University of Wolverhampton in the UK. Second on the list of the 10 oldest jokes was an innuendo-laden gag about a bored pharaoh and the local fisherwomen, a riot in 1600BC Egypt.

Gross-out humour may be timeless but Robinson predicts the warts-and-all style popularised by comics such as Judith Lucy will fade.

So, what is the one thing guaranteed to make an Aussie laugh at the moment? Mikey Robins ponders the question. "It's penguins. Penguins make Australians laugh, every time." ●



“Australians are at the juncture – we can do cutting, cerebral UK humour or the frenetic American humour.”

Merrick Watts (left, with radio co-host Tim Ross)