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green guide

TELEVISION AND RADIO



Casual gamers are causing a quiet revolution in the game world

LIVEWIRE: TECHNOLOGY



Toilet humour

Shane Jacobson takes
Kenny on a tour of the
world's dunnies.

Sanitary stories

The Jacobson brothers plumb the world's dunnies for a TV series. By **Bridget McManus.**

THERE was a time, after the runaway success of *Kenny* the movie, that Shane Jacobson seemed hell-bent on proving he could play other parts. After all, like most overnight successes, he has been in showbiz nearly all his life. The role of gambling gangster Nicely-Nicely Johnson in the stage production of *Guys and Dolls*, which finished its Melbourne run in July, was a perfect opportunity to show off his singing and dancing talents and his ability to slip into the skin of someone other than the Portaloo plumber beloved of so many Australians. Mission accomplished — he won a Helpmann award for best supporting actor — and, with a slightly slimmer silhouette, Jacobson is back in the beige overalls and blue shirt for *Kenny*, the television series.

"Kenny's a very good friend of mine," says Shane over coffee with his brother Clayton, who directed the film and TV series. "I'd rather him than Nicely-Nicely Johnson.

"The one thing we all want to feel in life is valued. Kenny makes everyone feel valued and he witnesses them in their purest form and acknowledges and respects that that is who they are and that is their place and there are no value judgements. I could watch Kenny go into any situation and it really doesn't have to be about toilets. He could go anywhere and he'd bring out the best in people."

Just as the film shone a new light on the business of toilet cleaning and maintenance, *Kenny's World*, coinciding with the United Nations' Year of Sanitation, peers into the least savoury places on the planet and comes up with some fascinating facts and heartwarming stories. With a crew of about five, Shane and Clayton covered 17 countries and 27 cities in eight weeks.

"We didn't want to take the film and then step up to this whole glossy travel hybrid thing," Clayton

explains. "We wanted it to retain that same energy and spirit that the film has which has that fly-on-the-wall feel about it. Every region and every story brings out another facet of Kenny's interest and intrigue. It's either informative, funny, novel, hilarious or really touching. So you can have a laugh one moment and then the very next part it's, 'Wow! I had no idea'. We're not just going after the cheap laughs; it's more than that.

"As humans we're incredibly creative when it comes to sanitation and the far-reaching effects that it has on our lives that we may or may not be aware of. For example, a lawyer walking into an earthquake-decimated part of China is not really going to be met with great excitement. He is the last person they need. They need Kennys, they need people to come in there and help out with sanitation, they need construction. They need all



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SHANE JACOBSON, actor

the people who are normally asked to move to the shadows once those streets are clean."

Because the movie was made in a mockumentary style, with narration by Kenny, the series feels like a natural continuation of the story. Kenny's girlfriend, air hostess Jackie (Eve von Bibra) catches up with him in Taiwan, where they dine at a toilet-themed restaurant. His father (Ronald Jacobson, Shane's father) and son (Jesse Jacobson, Clayton's son) appear via Skype. And the Sushi Cowboy (Morihiro Hasebe) meets up with Kenny at his first stop, Tokyo.

For Shane and Clayton, the series brings *Kenny* full circle. Before the feature film was conceived, the pair had planned to make a series to follow on from the short film that sparked the *Kenny* phenomenon.

"We discovered there really is enough information out there on the world of sanitation to do multiple series," says Clayton. "Not that we would. I think we've nailed it with this one.

"Strangely enough, ever since the film's been released it's out there in the Zeitgeist a little bit. I've only just realised that in the last five or so years, I think every sort of shock rock has been turned over and it really is like sanitation is the last taboo to be broken, and I think the timing of it's right. We are mature enough now as a culture to start looking at that and not be squeamish, to be upfront about it. Actually it's cyclical anyway. If you look through history, there have been many times when sanitation has been looked upon in a very matter-of-fact way."

Kenny's global escapades range from the quaint to the heartbreaking. At a temple in Kyoto, Japan, Kenny discovers that the plastic golden swirls sold in gift shops as good-luck tokens represent happy turds, formed into a spiral due to the ergonomically sensible practice of squatting rather than sitting on the loo. He takes part in a humility ritual which involves hours of kneeling and praying fol-

lowed by a trip through the village offering to clean household toilets with a bucket and cloth. Clayton insists the exercise was just as challenging for the crew.

"In the Jacobson family we avoid kneeling at all costs," says Clayton. "Sitting is a struggle. So it was really tough on our knees."

In India Kenny met a caste of "untouchable" women, forced to walk the streets carrying human excrement, ringing bells so the townsfolk could avert their gaze.

"That was very emotional to see," says Clayton. "But what was beautiful about that story was there is a program financed through volunteers where they've set up a school to educate these women and their children to try and break them out of that caste cycle. They end up going to the (2007) World Toilet Summit (in Singapore) and giving a speech and Kenny meets them there. That was a great moment because we didn't realise they'd be at the summit."

"There were some incredible statistics and things that we discovered like 42% of the world's population doesn't have access to proper sanitation," says Shane. "Seven hundred and fifty million people in India alone don't have access to toilets. An enormous number of children die of diarrhoea every few minutes. I mean, how many people died from bird flu — and it was called an epidemic — about 300? Thousands and thousands die of diarrhoea which is not a disease that can't be cured. A lot of people, I must admit my friends included, go, 'So the show's just about toilets'. It's much more than that. It's about people."

The Jacobsons' entertainment background is well known. Their father Ronald, the offspring of carnival folk, grew up in a tent in a street of houses in Maribyrnong. And young Shane and Clayton were





Kenny (Shane Jacobson, centre), learns humility through a toilet-cleaning ritual in Kyoto, Japan (above). Left, Shane with the director of *Kenny's World*, his brother Clayton. PICTURE: RODGER CUMMINS

working to find their niche in showbiz from early on. For Clayton, it was behind the scenes, as a director of just about every Australian video clip made in the 1980s.

"We used to watch *Rage* in the '80s," says Shane. "You drank a beer every time a clip came on that Clay and Rohan (Timlock, producer of *Kenny's World*), had worked on. You only had to sit there for 30 minutes and you were smashed."

The brothers agree that the character of Kenny represents so much of Jacobson family life.

Clayton says: "I was showing my dad this scene in Singapore (of *Kenny's World*) and dad just elbowed me and said, 'It's Uncle Bill!', and I went, 'It is!' And there was a moment in that episode that I took directly from something I remember my uncle telling me. So *Kenny* is our family and the sense of humour of *Kenny* is very much ingrained in our uncles and dad and particularly our grandmother, who was an incredibly funny and interesting human being who brought up a family on her own in a tent for many years."

They say travelling together on a hysterically tight schedule didn't test their friendship. Rather, they seem the ideal travelling collaborators. On location they would operate by a code of finger signals and facial quirks, using a secret language they have been developing since childhood.

"It was heavily researched and we did write scripts. But, of course, with any situation the idea is to give Shane as much background and as much safety net as possible, so that when you go out there, he can be ready to just allow for any moment

that just happens," says Clayton.

"When we're doing the scripts," says Shane, "We have a silent language. If something's happening over there... In Thailand there was this massive bulldozer, we were doing a scene and the ground started to move, so I had to run off. You get distracted and veer off the script. They're people in a real situation, they're telling you a story about their job or the country. They're in their culture and while that's happening you don't want to go, 'Stop! There's a truck coming!' You can't go, 'Cut! Can we do it again?'"

"It's a good thing we get along," says Clayton. "Because if we didn't it would be nothing short of maddening because when I go to work, I've got three editors working on the show and a couple of assistants and every single room has his voice coming out of it."

"Clay wanted me to carry around photos of him to make me endure the same thing," says Shane. At the end of the day I go, "How are you going, bro?" And he goes, "Yeah, well, you know, I've been staring at your head for about eight hours."

"The funny thing is, though, we love the character so much I don't even see Kenny as Shane," says Shane. "I mean, pretty much the way most Aussies too, they still don't recognise Shane as Shane. He's *Kenny*, and that's why we have to have *Kenny* around because Clay doesn't like me but he loves *Kenny*. I love him and he says, 'Yeah, I like you a lot but I love *Kenny*. That guy is cool.'"

There is more than a bit of *Kenny* in both brothers. They share the

same big-heartedness underneath their showbiz-sharpened exteriors. And the child star didn't necessarily grow up to be a star. It was Clayton, in fact, who dabbled in acting before *Kenny* arrived.

"I got all that out of my system," says Clayton. "For many, many years I acted in all my friends' films. I acted in a couple of films for Jane Campion not so long ago (*The Water Diary*, 2006,) and that was great fun."

"I always wanted to be an actor," says Shane. "And Clay always had a bigger acting showreel than me. I had no directing skills. Now it's turned."

For his foray into acting, Shane has found both fame and a liberating alter-ego.

"*Kenny's* an excellent ambassador. He's so distracted by things that I reckon get filed off the edge of your personality. He's childlike in a really mature way. We met some pretty amazing people, like the head of antiquities (Dr Zahi Hawass, general of the supreme council of antiquities in Egypt). No one gets a meeting with this guy. He's literally the one that can tell you to get off the pyramid. He's voted in the top 100 most influential people in the world and we get an interview with him. He must have been more important than us because we had one guy with a machine-gun and he had about 20. So I can guarantee I'm not going to be comfortable meeting him. But *Kenny*? *Kenny* can't wait."

Kenny's World premieres on Wednesday at 8pm on Ten. Critic's View, page 48