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SEPT 11-17

PLUS YOUR SEVEN-DAY GUIDE TO WHAT'S ON THE BOX

Watts' hollow humour

DRAMA **The Hollowmen**
ABC1, Wednesday, 9pm
Political satire
Duration: 30 minutes

DARREN DEVLIN

MERRICK Watts has never fancied his skills as a negotiator.

Never was this more obvious than when casting director Jane Kennedy suggested husband and *The Hollowmen* director Rob Sitch call Watts to sound him out about the role of Nick, a senior political adviser, in the ABC comedy.

So excited was Watts to receive the call from Sitch that he said yes to *The Hollowmen* without knowing what the show was about.

Watts had on the spot decided he'd be mad to knock back the opportunity to work with Sitch and co.

"I looked at this as a gift that had been offered," Watts says. "If they'd asked me to do it and I'd said no, it could potentially have been one of the biggest regrets of my life. I didn't make any demands, I didn't even read the contract."

Sitch believes if actors know their lines and are in tune with the intended tenor of a scene, it makes for an exhilarating shooting process.

Watts has appeared in plenty of improvised and sketch comedy on TV in the past, but *The Hollowmen* is his first "serious" acting job.

"I have to pretend to be smarter than I actually am, so that's where the acting comes in," Watts says with a smile.

The Hollowmen is a comedy set in the offices of the Central Policy Unit, an internal political think tank set up by the prime minister to develop long-term party policy.

The Hollowmen isn't Watts' only television project this year. He and Nova radio colleague Tim Ross are working on a new Comedy Channel show for Foxtel.

The Merrick and Rosso Show premieres at 8.40pm on October 2.



Chance: Merrick Watts.



Super bowl: Shane Jacobson (seated) with his dad, Ronald Jacobson, and Eve von Bibra.

OH, DUNNY BOY

Simon Plant gets a whiff of Kenny Smyth's new sanitation series



NOW we know. The outdoor dunny is uniquely Australian. We know this because Kenny Smyth, Australia's favourite Porta-loo plumber, has circled the globe looking for new trends in toilet technology. And not once on his travels through 28 cities did he find anything to compare with our stand-alone thunderbox.

England came close with a pop-up toilet. So did America with a jet-powered outhouse. But Smyth reckons "they still haven't perfected the art of the good old outback crapper. We've got that one to ourselves".

Smyth's loo-with-a-view journey is recounted in *Kenny's World*, a travel show that lifts the lid on attractions rarely featured on *Get-away* or *The Great Outdoors*. It's hard to imagine Catriona Rowntree enthusing over golden poo ornaments in Kyoto. Or Ernie Dingo inspecting an egg-shaped loo in London. But Smyth takes to these subjects like a duck to fast-flushing water.

"It's like Kenny's been given a boarding pass to the planet," Smyth's alter ego, Shane Jacobson says. "In all honesty, the toughest thing about this whole project was picking the best material."

Jacobson's 2006 comedy film, *Kenny* was a local hit and earned him an AFI Award for Best Actor.

"The requests for doing another movie were quite enormous," the 38-year-old says, "but there was so much more to be discovered by going around the world with this character."

Kenny's World was actually in the works before *Kenny* evolved as a full-length feature.

"Yeah, this was the older idea, the unborn child," he says. Question is: how did Jacobson — and his filmmaker brother, Clayton — persuade TV executives to back a sanitation series?

"Doing our research, it became clear no one else had touched the subject," he says. "And isn't it better to have a guy in overalls as your tour guide instead of some whispering, grey-haired egghead?"

Kenny's World mingles travellers' tales with animation and unearths "amazing facts".

Such as?

"Well, some of those shooting stars people make a wish on are waste products being jettisoned from a space station. I kid you not."



Toilet trail: Kenny Smyth, aka Shane Jacobson, in India (above) and Cairo.

SERIES **Kenny's World, PG**
Channel 10, tonight 8pm
Kenny goes international
Duration: 30 minutes

Jacobson also knows the ins and outs of zero-gravity super-loos, but don't tune into *Kenny's World* expecting toilet humour.

As with *Kenny*, which was really a riff on common decency, this unlikely comedy-doco (directed by Clayton) splices wisecracks with serious talk. Waste management, sanitation and germs — Smyth approaches all these issues with a straight face.

"That's the great thing about *Kenny*," Jacobson says. "He can ask anything of anybody and when he does, the camera becomes this great vacuum of information."

Was *Kenny's World* carefully scripted?

"Yeah, there was a definite game plan. Everyone had an exact position to play. But when the ball gets bounced, you don't always know which way it's gonna go."

Jacobson found the teeming, open-sewered streets of India especially confronting.

"A lot of things there affected us emotionally," he says. "We walked through a doorway — expecting to meet some schoolkids — and there were actually hundreds of them all lined up to meet us. Had a bit of trouble trying to keep our eyes dry."

But it's not Jacobson we see wiping away tears. It's Smyth.

"Kenny's the best person to react to it," he explains, "because he's an emotional guy, a parent."

DID Smyth's interviewees have any knowledge of *Kenny*?

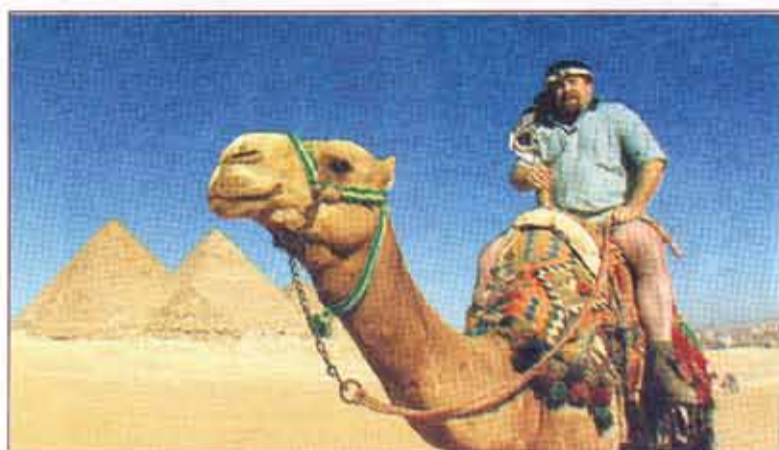
"Nine times out of 10, no. Our film has not been a hit in Egypt yet. But what *Kenny* brings to every conversation, even if he doesn't have the words, is his personality, his open-heartedness, his tenderness."

If *Kenny's World* has a smell, it's a mixture of jet fuel, curry and yeast "because *Kenny* had a few beers along the way".

But Jacobson believes his small-screen venture is probably easier on the eyes and the nose than the film was. "It's a merry-go-round that moves pretty quickly."

Having pulled chains in Scandinavia and worshipped penis statues in Tokyo, *Kenny Smyth* must be well positioned to craft a TV career. Jacobson is not so sure.

"Kenny won't return any of my calls," he says. "Reckons I'm a bit of a fake. Talk about irony."



Not all about Eve

DARREN DEVLIN

EVE VON Bibra has an earthiness and pragmatism that transcends the ego-obsessed world of show business.

It's probably a reason she works so well with Shane and Clayton Jacobson, the brothers behind the hit movie *Kenny* and its follow-up TV series *Kenny's World*.

As with Shane (who plays plumber *Kenny*) and director Clayton, von Bibra is anything but aloof — there are no tales to be heard about her being high-maintenance or difficult to work with.

Von Bibra's contribution to the *Kenny* movie is not to be underestimated.

Kenny might have been described by his cantankerous father as "a glorified t--- burglar", but the movie proved successful largely because it was about so much more than plumbing and portable toilets. Jacobson shone because he was able to add layers of warmth and humanity to the film through his portrayal of the character's fractured relationship with his wife and the anguish endured during time not spent with his son.

Von Bibra, as *Kenny's* romantic interest, flight attendant Jackie, played no small part in bringing an emotional edge to the film. She offered a hope *Kenny* might just get the relationship he deserved.

That von Bibra feels blessed to be part of the movie and the TV series should come as no surprise.



Rejuvenated: Eve von Bibra with Shane Jacobson in *Kenny*.

She studied acting in London at the Royal Academy of Dramatic art, has performed as a mezzo soprano with the Victorian State Opera, has worked on a string of TV productions and was part of the chart-topping band the Chantoozies.

Kenny is extra special, however, because it signalled von Bibra's comeback to the public spotlight after suffering a debilitating stroke.

"It you're going to be good at something you've got to be dedicated and *Kenny* rejuvenated my love of acting," von Bibra says.

"I had the stroke and it's taken a long time for me to come back. This (*Kenny*) is the first thing I did after the stroke so it's a very important thing in my life. It brought the joy back."

Von Bibra is as unpretentious as actors come. Though some would be using their recovery from a personal drama to build their profile, she is simply happy she managed to regain what the stroke had taken from her.

She says she learnt plenty in having to confront her mortality.

"It was a real challenge," she explains.

"I had to re-learn things. I'd lost eyesight and (use of) my right side.

"I was just so lucky that I got everything back because I know there are a lot of people who go through this who don't recover.

"I have great family and friends. My heart goes out to them. I am so lucky I had them by my side."

Isn't it better to have a guy in overalls as your tour guide instead of some whispering, grey-haired egghead?