

August 31, 2008

Life

Monday

Life Age Magazine



**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 dint 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)

Stylist: Hayley Calligroder. Dressed by Henry Bucks