

# Laid to the Rafters

James Madden takes a look at the state of Australian television drama.

Graphics by Laura Oberin.

programs

"Going to an Australian film is like going to the dentist; you know you ought to, but you know you're in for a lot of pain."

These are the words that echoed from the prolific Australian film director Dr George Miller. In an interview with Anne Maria Nicholson from ABC's *Lateline*, Miller was quoting a critic he'd overheard saying these controversial words. I was recently in a class where this interview was played. Laughter burst from my fellow students' mouths on hearing this sadomasochistic comparison. Why? Because behind the sneering description, we can see this comment is accurate.

This idea rings true for Australian television drama series as well. While not identical (Australian television drama is popular, as Nielsen ratings suggest), similar scepticism is met when considering the quality of these programs. I'd like to pose a controversial idea: that quality is all around us. I am not just being optimistic. We have plenty of wonderful Australian television drama on our screens. You just would not think that is the case if you tuned in to free-to-air commercial television.

Lampooning our own country's televisual culture is no new occurrence. Any person flipping through a metropolitan newspaper is sure to find an article that dissects the embarrassment that comes with some of our more popular exports, such as *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*. Instead of joining the fray, I am going to focus on where the quality lies.

Turn on ABC and SBS or pay TV, and you will find a score of Australian shows that will interest you and make you think, laugh and cry. Disclaimer: no, I do not work in any governmental television department or for Foxtel. And no, I am not selling myself to said agencies for employment opportunities. These are just the cold hard facts at the moment.

Commercial television, in contrast, offers an abundance of Australian-made productions. Currently, we have *Winners and Losers*, *Offspring*, *Sea Patrol*, *Rescue: Special Ops*, *Rush*, *City Homicide* and *Packed to the Rafters* screening on Channels 7, 9 and 10. However, when we turn on these shows, we see familiar stereotypical characters, in familiar stereotypical situations, in familiar stereotypical settings.

Take *Winners and Losers* for example. True, it has a central conceit that is audacious in comparison to its contemporaries, the concept being, "What if you were a loser in high school and suddenly won millions with your

fellow loser friends?" However, *Winners* fails to make the most out of this concept and instead opts for the recognisable stereotypes.

If we look at the alternative programming, we see quite a diverse list popping up with *East West 101*, *Bed of Roses*, *Rake*, *Laid*, *Spirited* and *Tangle* most recently screening on ABC, SBS and Foxtel. Looking at the back catalogue of these channels we also find award winning dramas such as *MDA*, *SeaChange* and *Love My Way*.

In *Laid*, we see a different central concept, perhaps as audacious as that of *Winners*: "What would happen if everyone you ever slept with started to die?" *Laid*, the dramedy brainchild of writers Marieke Hardy and Kirsty Fisher, features an unfamiliar main character. Roo (played by Allison Bell) is shy, awkward and loveable and has managed to get a few notches under her love-making belt. Her close relationship with her best friend/roommate propels the concept of "former lovers dropping dead" as the girls attempt to uncover why this is all happening. Little is familiar about these characters and the unconventional situations they find themselves in. They are awkward people, but not in the Ricky Gervais style where each awkward pause and scenario is milked for uncomfortable humour.

Our other examples of non-free-to-air shows correspond with their commercial counterparts. If we look at *Tangle* and *Packed to the Rafters*, we see two shows based on so-called "normal" relationships. The difference between the two demonstrates how depictions of "normal" can vary. *Rafters* depicts the odd fight with Mum and Dad as the most problematic storyline in an episode (apart from the highly-publicised death of Mel). *Tangle's* tension lies with infidelities and other betrayals of the heart, bringing a heightened and perhaps more accurate version of reality into each episode.

I am not trashing commercial television drama—I am simply a fighter for equality. I will not complain about commercial television if it features shows that are less predictable and less familiar. So often, Australian television drama is seen to be lacking in quality. It is then that we only hear of *Winners*, *Rafters*, and the classic *Home and Away* and *Neighbours* as examples, mainly because they are the most popular. Let us at least include all of our programs in the debate, whether their content is quality drama or commercial crap. Then, we have a more accurate idea of what Australian television drama has to offer today.

Good Australian

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