

## Living on the Wedge



*The Wedge* is populated by characters such as Fat Mandi.

Photo: *Supplied*

May 25, 2006

### **A new sketch comedy series reaches deep into suburbia for inspiration, writes Debi Enker.**

LOVELORN schoolgirl Lucy Webster (Rebel Wilson) is at once sneaky and transparent as she conspires to win the affection of her beloved Dylan while sabotaging his interest in her bestest friend, Courtney. A seasoned recipient of unemployment benefits, Henry (Adam Zwar) will dutifully turn up at the Western Job Network, present his dole diary and detail his job-hunting activities for the week. These could include approaching the Australian cricket team with the proposal that he become the opening batsman, or contacting the Beatles, the Doors and the Ramones with an offer to make up the numbers.

Then there's sportsman Mark Warey (Jason Gann), a serial misbehavior who must hold regular press conferences to apologise for his indiscretions and put an acceptable spin on the reasons for it. Regrettably, particularly for his manager (Dailan Evans), Mark just can't seem to act suitably contrite about his transgressions.

Meet some of the citizens of Wedgedale, the sprawling fictional suburb that is the home for a new, 26-episode comedy series. *The Wedge* arrives on the back of a fairly lean period for local comedy. The glory days were back in the late '80s and early '90s, when shows such as *The Comedy Company*, *Fast Forward*, *The Big Gig* and *Full Frontal* regularly drew substantial and appreciative audiences. Their characters - Kylie Mole, Con the Fruiterer and Pixie-Anne Wheatley - became familiar and widely recognised, their signature lines ("she goes, she goes, she goes, she just goes") became part of the popular lexicon.

Since then, there's not been a lot of locally produced sketch comedy to laugh about. Over recent years, *The Big Byte*, *SkitHouse* and *Comedy Inc* have come and gone. Last year, the ill-fated *Let Loose Live* lasted only two episodes.

But the people behind *The Wedge*, including executive producer Steve Dundon and co-executive

producer Ian McFadyen, are hoping that the time is right to launch a new sketch show, and that a softly, softly approach in its early days will allow the show to build support steadily.

"There's been a void in character-based comedy," says Dundon. "People need some recognisable characters that they can grow to love. *Kath & Kim* and Chris Lilley have been the two that have come out over the last couple of years, though *Kath & Kim* has been around for a long time. But there hasn't been much else."

McFadyen, one of the forces behind *The Comedy Company*, observes, "We've had sketch comedy over the last few years, but it's been very much one-off sketches, influenced by *The Sketch Show* from the UK. In that kind of generic sketch comedy, people are playing a policeman or a shopkeeper rather than playing Pixie-Anne Wheatley or Kylie Mole: they're everyman or everywoman characters rather than being distinctive characters with their own lives.

"We are making a character-based comedy series with sketches. The definition of a good character is a person who appears on a show but who we think has got a life outside: their life goes on somehow between shows. They've got husbands and wives and children, they've got an address, they have a kind of ongoing, independent existence. That's a real character. Just as *Kath and Kim* live in Fountain Lakes. You don't get that in one-off sketches: it's more like 'Two guys walk into a pub'."

In the market for writer-performers who could create the kinds of striking and robust characters that they were seeking, the producers held casting calls in Melbourne and Sydney, selected a core team of about a dozen from around the country and got to work developing characters. McFadyen says that they stopped counting characters at about 40, and that over the six months that *The Wedge* is scheduled to screen, about 30 will appear.

Two pilots were made last year and, as production began in earnest in October, much of the show has already been shot. This puts the producers in the handy position of being able to see which characters ignite viewer interest and recutting their programs to give those characters a regular profile.

As to the setting in fictional Wedgedale, McFadyen explains, "A lot of TV shows, and most comedy shows, work on the idea of a microcosm. The classic microcosm is *The Simpsons'* Springfield. You could easily look at *The Wedge* and say there's people in there like sportsmen and TV presenters. But look at Springfield: you've got Krusty the Clown and a millionaire, Mr Burns; there's a mayor who's a bit like a senator, and so on. *Gilligan's Island* was an attempt to show a cross-section of people, some miniature version of American society, in one location. That's what you're striving to do in a show, to find a way to get a cross-section of contemporary society."

McFadyen and Dundon maintain that Wedgedale could sit comfortably on the outskirts of any Australian city. It's a place where the suburban sprawl meets the yet-to-be-developed paddocks. This is a show that sees its heart and soul squarely in the 'burbs and its comic fodder in the range of people who might live there. But as McFadyen has suggested, the elastic borders of municipality mean that just about anyone could be found there, from farmer Jack and pokie-playing mums Sherrine and Leanne, to a pair of golf-playing plastic surgeons and TV newsreader Sandra Sultry.

"We didn't start out wanting to do a political satire," says McFadyen. "We didn't want to do something that was for inner-suburban coffee-drinkers and intellectuals. We wanted to do something that's about where the bulk of Australians live, what they do, what they think, who you meet at the shopping centre.

That's where these characters belong."

The creative minds behind the show have developed an array of characters with a keen eye on the Ten Network's target audience of 16 to 39-year-olds. They're hoping there will be something to tickle everyone, although the recent casualty rate among comedies and the take-no-prisoners attitude of commercial broadcasters isn't far from their minds.

"Obviously, if this doesn't work, it's gone," says Dundon. "But Ten has given us enough time to develop the show so that it can work. We hope that people will come along for the ride. And the timing is right: people are ready for a laugh."

**The Wedge premieres on Tuesday at 8pm on Channel Ten.**

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