

Off the plan

May 28, 2006

The McMansions of our cities' new estates provide the backdrop for Ten's new comedy sketch show, *The Wedge*. Melinda Houston takes a tour.

Maybe it has something to do with our attachment to the quarter-acre block. But geography has always been a cornerstone of Australian television. From Bellbird to Kingswood Country, Summer Bay to Drovers Run, place is often as important as plot. Thanks to Jane Turner and Gina Riley, Fountain Gate is as much a state of mind as it is a mega-mall. Now there's a new kid on the block - Wedgedale, home to a host of new comedy characters making their debut on the Ten Network this week.

The series, *The Wedge*, blends sketch and character comedy centred on that very Australian phenomenon, the outer-urban housing development. So if Wedgedale, a fictional satellite suburb clinging to the edge of the city, seems strangely familiar, that's no accident.

"I was drawing on day-to-day life," says executive producer Steve Dundon.

"I drive through these suburbs, these satellite cities every day. Most people do. It's a contemporary view of Australia."

The town itself is as much a part of the joke as, well, the jokes. If you're sharp-eyed, there's plenty to enjoy in the scenery. As well as the hectares of red-tiled roof, the beer barn, the half-built houses backing on to salt-blasted "greenfield", there are signs everywhere - welcoming you to Wedgedale and celebrating a host of third-rate achievements.

There's that slightly anxious self-consciousness, that seeking of approval that's so much a part of the contemporary Australian mindset, and so very evident in small towns across the country. Some of the road signs are just bad puns, but one - cheekily - points us to "Pakenham" in one direction, "Wedgedale" in another. And yes, if you're familiar with Cranbourne you'll know exactly what to expect. But like the best Australian social satire (*Kath and Kim*, *We Can Be Heroes*) it's as fond as it is irreverent.

And the multifaceted location - there's a shopping plaza, two schools, a radio and television station, a pub and club - creates the opportunity to give the 'burb an equally varied population. "As a location Wedgedale is everything from Wandin Valley to Ramsey Street," Dundon says. "And that allows more diversity."



Rebel Wilson and Kate Jenkinson as the pokie chicks.

Photo: *Supplied*

Some of the creations are familiar - the newsreader, the sports commentators, the schoolgirl, the real estate agent. (Dundon says part of his brief to himself was to try to "emulate the success of similar shows in the past".) But, blessedly, they've all been given a 21st-century makeover (the schoolgirl, for instance, stalks her true love via webcam). Others, like the struggling farmer, are both a perfect Wedgedale fit and such a rich vein of comedy you can't help wonder why it hasn't been mined sooner. Still others - like psycho-chainsaw-guy - are just plopped in, partaking much more of the straight sketch format. But because the show blurs the line between story and sketch, the odd irrelevance doesn't seem to matter.

For the Ten Network, which has bought the show from Dundon's production company, Cornerbox, it was a gutsy move. Following the spectacular failure of a string of new sketch series over the past few years, it must have taken some nerve to step once more into the breach. But while projects such as *skitHOUSE* had a distinctly back-to-the-future feel about them, *The Wedge* is promising us something new, not least in its bevy of relative unknowns.

"They've taken a punt on fresh talent," says writer and key cast member Jason Gann. "They've gone for the newly funny, not what used to be funny. And that surprised me. The big networks tend to want to back something they know is a sure thing. But you do have to take a risk."

That risk has been hedged by bringing in comedy heavyweights such as Steve Vizard and Russell Gilbert to mentor the younger players and oversee the creative process. "They're like encyclopedias of comedy," Gann says. "I've learned so much from them, and at the same time they have faith in us to be ourselves."

Like everyone involved, he can't help but be aware that television sketch comedy has shown an alarming tendency to sink like a stone in recent years. He's hoping the particular characteristics of *The Wedge* - including a huge collective of contributing writers - will keep it buoyant. "They've trusted us. But they've also said there are no guarantees," Gann says. "They've said, 'go ahead, write something. And if it's funny enough, we'll use it'. It's survival of the fittest, survival of the funniest. And I like that."

The Wedge works best when the actors play it straight (and indeed, most of them are actors rather than comics). It's as much about the familiarity of Wedgedale's residents as it is about the gags. "Character comedy had been neglected," says writer Ross Daniels. "Then you started to see things like *Kath and Kim*, *We Can Be Heroes*. And essentially I think that's where the best stuff comes from, the characters. Those characters can be over the top, they can be larger than life, but if there's some truth in them too, that's when they really work."

In some cases, there's been too much truth. One of Wedgedale's regulars is "the apologising sportsman", patently based on Shane Warne. "But as we developed that character Warnie kept popping up every month, apologising for something else - often things we'd scripted," Daniels says. "We wrote the hapless farmer, whose catchphrase is, 'it could be worse'. *Then Australian Story* featured this farmer, and he was the spitting image of our character - including saying, 'it could be worse' about five times during the show. So I guess it proves we're hitting the mark. Though it does make it hard to be stranger than real life. We'll just have to keep getting sillier and sillier."

The Wedge screens on Tuesday at 8pm.

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