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Black Comedy: Australia's first indigenous sketch show since 1973 hits the screens

By Kathryn Kernohan

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Investigative reporter Jeff McMullen has explored a lot of complex stories throughout his career. But few have been as unique as Jerome, a 14-year old indigenous boy born without any sporting ability whatsoever, or as the journalist puts it, completely un-co.

The fact the slight teenager favours physics over football hasn't dissuaded his school from throwing its entire sporting budget at him, convinced they can transform him into the next Greg Inglis or Lance Franklin.



0:29

Trailer: Black Comedy

A sketch comedy show by "blackfellas ... for everyone". Featuring an ensemble cast of indigenous writers and performers, and many special guest cameo appearances.

"We're not some posh school that's got black kids coming out their arse," reasons the school's sports master.

Fortunately, this bewildering tale is entirely fictional. It's also evidence that no prejudice or stereotype is off-limits in new ABC sketch series *Black Comedy*.



Fast-paced and consistently funny: Deborah Mailman and Elizabeth Wymarra perform their Housewives of Narromine skit in *Black Comedy*.

"Comedy has always been such a big part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Our ability to laugh at ourselves and at tough situations is what's gotten us through 250 years," says actor Aaron Fa'aoso. "Life's far too serious as it is to not take the piss out of yourself, or your culture."

The six-episode series, written by and starring indigenous performers, is the first comedy by the ABC's Indigenous Department. Since its launch in 2010, the department has primarily produced critically acclaimed drama including *Redfern Now*, *The Gods of Wheat Street* and telemovie *Mabo*. But department head Sally Riley says comedy has always been on the cards.

"I've always thought comedy is an area we could excel in, an area I feel we're built for, because the Aboriginal sense of humour is one people respond to," she says.

The show's life began in 2012 when, Riley says, the network put a callout for "Aboriginal people who thought they were funny." Sixteen candidates attended a weeklong workshop with producers Mark O'Toole and Kath Shelper, before five went on to write and perform the series (Fa'aoso is the only ensemble cast member not credited as a writer).





Nothing is sacred: ABC series *Black Comedy*.

The first all-indigenous comedy since 1973's *Basically Black*, *Black Comedy* is a watershed moment in indigenous programming. At the same time, it's a welcome addition to what has been otherwise been a dismal few years for homegrown sketch comedy, with the exception of last year's *Elegant Gentleman's Guide to Knife Fighting*.

Fast-paced and consistently funny, the series has a strong mix of character skits, hashtag-friendly catchphrases, pop culture parodies and cameos by big names like Deborah Mailman and Brendan Cowell. Each episode has a recurring narrative, like Jerome's story or a white woman (Brooke Satchwell) who adopts her indigenous boyfriend's culture with cringeworthy results.

Just below the surface are some pertinent observations about casual racism and disadvantage.

"Comedy's a great tool to get a message across, I've always felt that if you can make people laugh, you can get away with other things," says writer/performer Steven Oliver. "When I write, I like to plant seeds in people's heads to get them thinking about issues. To have people laugh at the same time is an awesome bonus."

While the provocative, occasionally controversial humour is born from the indigenous experience, Riley hopes the laughs are universal.

"We really wanted it to appeal to a wide audience and I think we offend almost everyone, which is what we set out to do," she laughs.

This is the first major TV role for most cast members, including poet and playwright Oliver. By contrast, Fa'aoso is a veteran of dramas like *East West 101* and *The Straits* who relished "having a crack" at making people laugh.

"Comedy is such a hard medium, but it was a real breath of fresh air from the heavy-type roles I've played, and a great opportunity to showcase blackfella comedy," he enthuses.

The actors agree that although *Black Comedy* is worthy of celebration, indigenous people remain vastly underrepresented on our screens. Riley says successes like *Redfern Now*, which created 250 creative and behind-the-scenes jobs for indigenous people, have undoubtedly "made a dent" but she remains steadfast in her vision.

"I want to see Aboriginal people on TV every night of the week, not just a couple of times a year. I want it to be normal to see Aboriginal and multicultural faces on TV. It's not a news story," she says.

Oliver echoes the views of actors Firass Dirani and Jay Laga'aia, who created headlines two years ago when they criticised the lack of ethnic diversity on Australian TV.

"In the 39 years of my life, I can only think of five indigenous people who have had a presence on commercial TV," he says. "You look at the AFL and one in every 11 players is indigenous. I wonder, what if one in 11 people on TV shows was indigenous?"

"But at the same time, I've seen the ABC take a lot of risks on shows which have been picked up by commercial TV. We're lucky to have them lead the way."

In addition to *Redfern Now* telemovie *Promise Me*, the network has a second indigenous comedy, set in an Alice Springs radio station (8-Triple-M), to screen next year. And should a second series of *Black Comedy* be commissioned, Oliver is already full of ideas.

"We didn't do anything on the racist rants that happen on trains nowadays," he laments. "When my aunty saw it on TV, she asked 'why don't they have a wanker carriage?' I thought that would be a great sketch, to have all these racist people and put them on the wanker carriage. Maybe that's an idea for next year."

***Black Comedy*, ABC, Wednesday, 9.30pm.**