

## Cover story

## Sex, scandal and sprogs

Sarah Lang discovers the new *Outrageous Fortune* season has the West family beset by outside forces – and facing a baby boom.



**BATTLING FOR BABY:** Jane (Stella King) and Loretta (Antonia Prebble).

**F**RAMING YOUR father for burglary, sleeping with his missus while impersonating your twin, getting yourself beaten up to make your enemy look bad, trying to sell your baby ...

Very little is out on bounds on aptly titled local series *Outrageous Fortune*, and that's just a few of last season's highlights. Already the country's longest-running drama, *Outrageous* will break more New Zealand telly ground when fervently awaited season five starts on June 2.

Chock-full of cleavage, ciggies, rum, rows, scuffles, swearing, love triangles and those notorious sex scenes, the show orbits around the working-class West Auckland West family, their lovers, haters and associates. Leopard skin-loving, chain-smoking matriarch Cheryl, played by Robyn Malcolm, has her hands full trying to keep her errant family together and out of trouble – or at least to stop her adult kids (ditzzy Pascalle, cunning Loretta, lawyer Jethro and his perpetually-stoned twin Van) from fitting up and fighting each other.

While the family screws things up for each other more often than not, when the chips are down the Wests stick together. And these eternal underdogs take us along on their roller-coaster ride.

That family heart, Kiwi-battler characters, perfectly pitched storylines, and a clever mesh of drama and comedy are some of the reasons *Outrageous Fortune* has been dubbed the best television New Zealand has ever made. Since its first season in 2005, the South Pacific Pictures show has been a hit with viewers. In 2007, it was TV3's top local show, and last year it rated even better, pulling in an average 777,000 viewers per episode. That made it the second-highest-rating peak-time series across all channels, second only to *Desperate Housewives*.

Our most-decorated drama, *Outrageous* took home a trolley-full of trophies from last year's Qantas Film and Television Awards, with eight wins, including best drama, and all three directing nominations.

Continuing its Midas touch, *Outrageous* has screened in Australia, Canada, Serbia, UK, Italy, Greece, Ireland and across Europe and Asia on cable networks. Picking up on a winning formula, localised versions have been made in the UK (*Honest*), and US (*Good Behavior*). Meanwhile, all four DVDs have hurtled into the top 10, the soundtrack *Westie Rules* has gone platinum, and on [www.outrageousfortune.co.nz](http://www.outrageousfortune.co.nz), diehard fans buy the T-shirts, soak up quizzes, quotes and Q&As, discuss topics such as "Cheryl's wine

glasses" and speculate on storylines.

So great is the fans' appetite that a book *The West Family Album* will be published in August. This "ultimate guide" to *Outrageous Fortune* details everything from the contents of Pascalle's handbag to Van and Munter's Tool Guy code, plus a drinking game, quiz, photos and interviews.

Recently, there has been media speculation that, given the show's financial success, cast members had pushed for more pay and that South Pacific Pictures had responded by threatening to pull the plug. Asked to respond, a SSP spokesperson says: "There was no issue about pay rates and we don't wish to comment further on this as it relates to confidential contractual details. However, we would like to note the story in the *Sunday Star-Times* was incorrect."

Whatever the actors' pay rates, they're earning every penny in season five (catch the trailer on YouTube). Expect the Wests to set the outrageous bar even higher this season, as they defend themselves against outside forces, particularly scheming siblings Sheree and Nicky Greegan. In last season's emotional finale, Grandpa got married, a contrite Loretta moved back home, wealthy widow Pascalle announced a shock engagement to Nicky, and viewers were left hanging on various scores. How much more will Nicky scam out of Pascalle, and will they tie the knot? Has Wolf left for good? Will Sheree find out her twins are Jethro's, not Van's? Will Loretta reform or perhaps get back in bed with her baby's father, Hayden?

With Cheryl and Sheree up the duff, and Kasey trying, season five will up the baby count. We can also reveal the peal of wedding bells, and that popular crim Eric is back in town. Meanwhile, new trouble-in-the-works character Detective Sergeant Gerard, played by easy-on-the-eye Charles Mesure, arrives to shake things up. The first episode begins with a raid on the West house. Is the smooth-talking cop out to get the Wests or has he got bigger fish to fry?

On [www.outrageousfortune.co.nz](http://www.outrageousfortune.co.nz), writer/co-creator/executive producer James Griffin dangles this teaser: Crooked property tycoon Gary won't be back but expect a new character called Angel; natural-glow queen Suzanne Paul makes an appearance as herself; there's some "very traumatic moments"; and "it's highly likely that someone will end up in prison".

An undisclosed West Auckland house is used for exterior scenes, but the West house interior is a set at the sprawling maze of SPP's Henderson HQ. It's as though a rudimentary house has



been lifted up *Wizard of Oz*-style by a tornado, had its roof torn off, and been deposited inside another, gigantic building.

Walking into the familiar lounge with its faded carpet and retro wallpaper, feels a bit like Alice in Wonderland suddenly dropping into the rabbit hole. Off the hall, the bedrooms look tiny, with two fake babies on Cheryl's bed. The cavernous ceiling with industrial-size beams and overhanging set lights seems incongruous. Doors open to nowhere and a huge screen-like painting of West Auckland suburbia serves as the window's view.

Further along is watering hole The Rusty Nail, almost eerily quiet with its faded booths and fridges of beer untouched. (Yes, the actors do eat the fries – sometimes too many in the first take.) Next we pass the prison entrance, Jethro's and Loretta's, plus Nicky's and Judd's offices. Nothing's been overdone. The West's basement feels particularly authentic, dusty and crammed with tools, boxes and other odds-and-ends. Grandpa's caravan, a tight squeeze for the filming crew, is on its lonesome at SPP's furthest-flung end.

Back at the West "house", Cheryl, in trademark tight jeans, heels and clingy top, is putting away groceries and launching into an F-word-studded argument. (Malcolm, who says she's "much more middle-class and not as comfortable with conflict", adores her character's flesh-hugging outfits. "I never wear that stuff in real life so I lap it up!")

In a nearby enclave, director Simon Bennett and other kingpins hunch over TV screens which display what's being shot.

With two cameras rolling at once, it takes all day to shoot an episode – a lot longer than it does next door at *Shortland Street*. Drama's more of a perfectionist art, here requiring at least three rehearsals then at least two takes of each shot set-up, from wide establishing shots to close-ups. Between takes, makeup artists dart on-and-off and smiling 1-year-old Stella King, who plays Baby Jane, is passed to dad for a cuddle. An hour later, the two-minute scene finally wraps.

After a coffee break, the men-of-the-house rehearse a whisky-and-joint-sharing scene in the lounge. Anthony Starr (Van/Jethro) gives Bennett his 2 cents-worth on where the actors could be positioned.

Then a bouquet of flowers, a lemon cake and a throng of people trail through the door singing *Happy Birthday*. It's Siobhan Marshall's 26th. In pink crocs, a tight dress, cropped black jacket with that very-Kiwi rising inflection, she seems less ditzzy than character Pascalle, though you can believe she used to be a Westie. "We're quite different. I'm not as ballsy as Pascalle but I'm getting better."

Beside her, screen sister Antonia Prebble lounges in a slimline black outfit, in line with Loretta's new glam, china-doll look. Friendly, funny and a self-confessed swot, "Toni" is a lot more personable than defensive Loretta, though she says they're similarly "cerebral" rather than emotional.

After nearly five years working together, the cast has become close to the point where Prebble and Marshall have travelled overseas together, and Malcolm sometimes feels "like a proud mum". When the last scene of season five wraps, they head home not knowing if they'll ever be back. The question on everyone's lips is: Will there be a sixth season? Will *Outrageous* become our first drama to pass the 100-show mark?

With the actors, writers and TV3 all in, the decision rests, as Bennett puts it, "in the lap of the funding gods". While NZ On Air is waiting to see season five before making the final funding call, CEO Jane Wrightson says that, as long as the other major players are keen: "I'm sure we'll look favourably on a series renewal."

And with Griffin confirming a sixth season will be the last, we'd better lap up the leopard-skin while we can.

*Outrageous Fortune* returns to TV3, Tuesday, June 2.

# Undead love affair

Tim Robey wonders why the undead are invading mainstream culture.

**L**AST MONTH, Woody Harrelson attacked a member of the living dead at New York's LaGuardia airport. Disappointingly, this was only in his mind. The altercation was in fact with a celebrity photographer, who filed a complaint with police after Harrelson broke his camera and shoved him in the face.

How to explain such an unprovoked attack? Harrelson's statement ran as follows. "I wrapped a movie called *Zombieland*, in which I was constantly under assault by zombies, then flew to New York, still very much in character. With my daughter at the airport I was startled by a paparazzo, whom I quite understandably mistook for a zombie." Ah, the old zombie defence. The snapper should be thanking his lucky stars that his assailant didn't go further – everyone knows the only sure way to get a zombie off your back is to destroy its brain, preferably by decapitation. If the film had been called *Vampireland*, and they'd been foolish enough to hand out some souvenir stakes at the wrap party, it could have gotten messier yet.

However tongue-in-cheek Woody's confusion may have been, the incident is a revealing one for our times, because the undead – specifically, zombies and vampires – have become a staple, almost routine feature of the cultural landscape. Tomas Alfredson's glacially sinister Swedish vampire movie *Let the Right One In* has received the most rhapsodic movie reviews of the year. Meanwhile, *Garvin & Stacey*'s James Corden and Matthew Horne have got some of the worst, for their spoofy romp *Lesbian Vampire Killers*, out now in New Zealand cinemas.

Talk about running the gamut – from refined Euro-art sensation to gutter-level lowbrow turkey, ghouls have started marauding across every available media outlet. And this is just the vamps. Zombies have an even more virulent way with a franchise, from the video-game derived *Resident Evil* series to *28 Days* and *28 Weeks Later*, not forgetting the comic riffs of 2004's *Shaun of the Dead*.

Has the popularity of the undead reached an apex? Let's see. Most people would point to F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), with its fusion of shilling-shocker thrill value and challenging Expressionist style, as the locus classicus for the vampire flick. But Max Schreck was by no means the original bloodsucker on our screens – the first known motion picture about vampires was made in 1896. Zombies were ushered in with the Haitian voodoo chillers *White Zombie*

(1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), before evolving into the racially unspecific, shuffling, moaning hordes we now recognise in George A. Romero's seminal *Night of the Living Dead* (1968).

Both tribes have been with us a long, long time – indeed, crawling all over our screens in the respective heydays of Universal and Hammer horror.

In the case of vampires, the mysterious appeal of this figure has always been his triumph over not just death but ageing. Cinema has cottoned on to this only gradually – why cast the wizened and feral Schreck as your ageless, immortal being, when you could have Tom Cruise or Brad Pitt in their prime? If you trace the successive generations of Draculas on screen, from Bela Lugosi in the original Universal version, through Christopher Lee and Gary Oldman to Gerard Butler (in *Wes Craven's Dracula 2000*) they get younger and more sexually rapacious every time.

Zombies are more gregarious beasts. Because they lack the power of independent thought, filmmakers have latched on to them as embodiments of the herd mentality: Romero saw the potential for allegory here. His great *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), remade for a different age by Zack Snyder in 2004, had them over-running an abandoned shopping mall, drifting up and down the escalators to anaesthetising muzak, like every chain store's ideal customer.

The difference now is one of repute. These creatures, who once lurked in the B-movie shadows, the dust-covered coffin of cult or underground status, have emerged into the glare of mainstream scrutiny, even empathy. The loner hero of Romero's *Martin* (1977) may have believed himself to be a vampire – the travelling family in Kathryn Bigelow's road movie *Near Dark* (1987) actually were. But these were niche films, seen and re-seen by horror aficionados bored of the endless, increasingly naff Dracula spin-offs and unimaginative slasher flicks. Now you can make a teen romance with a vampire as your romantic lead, and it'll take close to \$200 million at the US box office. That's *Twilight*, which also became the best-selling DVD on launch in New Zealand. *Let the Right One In*, though a more artistically satisfying spin on the same idea, has the undeniable commercial disadvantage of being in Swedish. Amid the current vamp-mania, the fact that an English-language remake is in the works is hardly surprising.

VAMPIRE KID:  
Lina Leandersson in *Let  
The Right One In*.



What this injection of new vitality into the undead bloodstream has required is a younger generation of viewers, who are happy to accept the vampire's heart as something more than a stake receptacle, and to see these genres messed about, parodied and cross-fertilised in ways which lift them into the mass market. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was a crucial recruitment ground for this ever-growing fan base – it's hard to imagine *Twilight*'s success without it. The character of sympathetic vampire Spike (James Masters) may have a lot more snarling Goth-punk attitude than *Twilight*'s terminally brooding Edward Cullen, but he was an important prototype for this new breed of emo-vamp.

Sympathetic or fanciable zombies have been slower to materialise – somehow, it's hard to imagine wanting to get one into bed – but their comic potential is a lot greater, as befits anything that stumbles around in such gormless, unthinking thrall to its own appetites.

The latest genre mash-up in the works is a film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, 15 per cent written by Seth Grahame-Smith, whose previous books include *How to Survive a Horror Movie* and *The Big Book of Porn*, and 85 per cent by some upstart called Jane Austen. It keeps all the main characters from her best-loved novel, but adds a few who aren't alive, don't speak, and would presumably rather eat the Bennet sisters than propose to them. "Elizabeth," we read, "lifted her skirt – a rather immodest gesture necessitated by circumstance – and delivered a swift kick to the creature's head, which exploded in a cloud of brittle skin and bone." The casting possibilities are endless – let's hope for a cameo from Judi Dench and Michael Gambon.

Viva the undead revolution!

–Telegraph Group

*Lesbian Vampire Killers* is out now in cinemas (review, p12). *Twilight* and *Let the Right One In* are available on DVD.



SPOOF: *Lesbian Vampire Killers*.