

COVER STORY

Wild Wests

Outrageous Fortune is soon to return to TV3 for a record fourth season. Sarah Lang reports on why the show keeps Kiwi viewers tuning in – and what's ahead.

FANS AREN'T the only ones stoked that *Outrageous Fortune's* tight jeans and killer one-liners are returning to our screens. TV3's head of drama and comedy Caterina de Nave is thankful too: not just because viewers tune into TV3 in droves for it, but because she won't be fielding so many fiddly phonecalls. "Not a day goes by without a caller desperately asking when it's coming back," she says. "I've had to say, mysteriously, 'Soon'." She's now off the hook: Season Four premieres Tuesday, June 17.

Zooming in on matriarch Cheryl West's attempts to keep her bogan family away from crime, the hit show premiered back in July 2005. By the end of this fourth season, *Outrageous* will take the title of the country's longest-running drama: its 70 episodes will surpass *Street Legal's* 53-episode, four-season run (yes, *Shortland Street* is our long-distance winner, but it's firmly in the soap-opera category).

Turning four is a rare feat. Only a handful of home-grown drama series have made it beyond two seasons: *Gloss*, *Marlin Bay*, *Mortimer's Patch* and *Mercy Peak* each ran for three.

Good from the get-go, *Outrageous* crucially snagged top ratings in its first and second seasons, a period many nascent local dramas don't survive. By its third season last year, the show's 382,000-viewer average made it TV3's top local show for the year (only beaten by the Rugby World Cup and the world's most popular show *CSI*). That's another breakthrough as, until now, local dramas have lagged behind international shows in ratings.

"There's a confidence about the series I don't think we've quite captured in local drama before," says TV3 programming director Kelly Martin. "And I don't think any have captured the support of the New Zealand public in the same way."

The show has captured oodles of accolades, too. Most recently, *Outrageous* cleaned up at this year's Qantas TV Awards and the Air NZ Screen Awards, including both best drama awards. Indeed, everything *Outrageous* seems to turn to gold. Soundtrack *Westie Rules* debuted at number one on the New Zealand charts then went platinum and all three DVD series have hurtled into the top 10 to buy (after its March release, series three even edged out *Flight of the Conchords* for the number-one spot).

And it's not just Kiwis who can't get enough of the Wests. Not only has *Outrageous* aired in Australia, Canada, Serbia, UK, Italy, Greece and other European countries, the rights to make localised versions have been snapped up; pretty much unheard of for a New Zealand show and a welcome windfall for its makers, New Zealand's leading TV-and-film-production company South Pacific Pictures. The UK version *Honest*, starring Amanda Redman, screened earlier this year, US version *Good Behaviour* is in production for ABC, and other international companies have expressed interest.

There's plenty of theories about what has tickled fancies across the country and the globe. There's the characters you can't help like, despite, or perhaps because of, their contradictions and fallibility. There's the laugh-out-loud-funny, no-holds-barred script that is thankfully minus the forced lines that other Kiwi shows suffer. There's a refreshing lack of middle-class restraint: the Wests say and do things we wish we could but don't. There's the celebration of raunchiness (in season one, the writers aimed to put a sex scene in every episode). There's that thought-provoking theme of the difference between what's legal and what's moral, and the strong premise of a woman trying to do the best for her family.

Robyn Malcolm, who has scooped best-actress awards for her performance as queenpin Cheryl, reckons the balance of drama and comedy is key. "And there's a charm to our rough-and-ready, slightly-guerrilla nature, and



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RACHEL LANG, ABOVE,
WITH FELLOW WRITER, JAMES GRIFFIN

while the backdrop's crime that is set against family life which people relate to."

Malcolm may be the face of *Outrageous*, but its brains are Rachel Lang and James Griffin. *Outrageous* co-creators, writers, storyliners, script editors and executive producers, they're a tried-and-true team who've worked together on-and-off since starting at TVNZ on the same day in 1985. Sometimes they finish each other's sentences and when they banter it's clear where the show's irreverent sense of humour springs from.

Billed as a drama not as a comedy, *Outrageous* has thrived on the lack of pressure to be funny, says Lang, and come up with its own mix of tragedy-threaded comic drama. "I think it's a relief the show's not meant to be good for you. The Wests break rules and aren't constantly worried about what people think, and I think New Zealanders enjoy that difference."

South Pacific Pictures drama head Simon Bennett was immediately impressed when Griffin and Lang pitched the idea. "This was so different: rash, trashy with a roughness and rawness." Now an *Outrageous* executive producer and director, he says character/actor centrality is crucial. "It's not often characters are sitting down with a cuppa. An actor might say 'I want to play this scene without looking at him' and I'll consider it; either it works or it doesn't. That process of negotiation and discovery makes *Outrageous* vigorous, full of life and movement."

And, as its title suggests, unlike more predictable shows, you never know what's around the corner, whether it's bodysnatching, babyselling, or, er, self-pleasuring. Says de Nave, who approves all scripts: "We didn't think 'Let's be risqué and say f***': they're an earthy family, so you can't sanitise it."

Whatever the key ingredients, the formula works. *Outrageous* fans span regular viewers through to die-hard groupies, who congregate on www.outrageousfortune.co.nz. There's quizzes, photos, profiles, actor Q&As, and chat forums where fans with monikers like "westwannabe" suggest names for Loretta's baby, petition for an *Outrageous*

clothing line, and discuss what they don't want to happen in series four.

As the curtain fell last year on series three, we were left wondering how Loretta will cope with reluctant motherhood, whether Pascale will attain international stardom, and how Cheryl will react to estranged husband Wolf (Grant Bowler) turning up on the doorstep.

Here's a hint – don't worry, no spoilers – of series four's flavour. It'll be about the kids taking control of their lives, warring with their parents, what happens when Wolf and Cheryl square off against each other, and whether Cheryl wants him back. Plus we'll see whether the new family additions, Wolf's girlfriend Sheree and her brother Nicky, are any threat to the West dynasty.

While consensus is the show's gotten slicker since series one, Griffin says what is more unusual is that it hasn't changed too much. "We haven't felt the need to stretch it unwieldy directions just to keep it alive. It's generating its own energy."

So, can that momentum be sustained? Can *Outrageous* break the deadlock and new ground in New Zealand, with a fifth, sixth or even seventh season?

"You do have to know when to stop flogging the horse but we haven't reached that stage," claims Bennett. He says if Griffin and Lang keep writing, the cast stay on, the network keeps commissioning and New Zealand On Air keeps funding, chances of more seasons are strong. "But if any one of them falls over its future is tenuous."

Does anyone want out?

Griffin: "If it was too much hard work and it wasn't generating stories we'd pull the plug, but there's still a generous bunch of stories left." Lang chips in: "But it's so much about those core characters we can't do it without them." Griffin and Lang are both keen to stay on board if the actors do, too.

In turn, the actors are courting the writers. Says Malcolm: "We're still loving it. If the writers stay in love with the characters and keep writing the stories, we'll play them. What's brilliant is this is year four and, unlike some shows where you start churning out the same old stuff, the challenges are still coming. TV is a long-distance run and we've got stamina."

But can *Outrageous* run a few more laps before collapsing at the finish line? "All the signs are there. As long as the audience keeps saying 'Yup, we want more of these people' ..."

The ratings, website traffic and pleading phonecalls speak for themselves. And there's no sign TV3, who predict *Outrageous* will be its top-rating 2008 show, want out. Programming director Kelly Martin says TV3 is "definitely exploring options for a fifth series" although no decisions have been made about a sixth.

So with the writers, actors and network in for at least round five, that leaves the funders. Because drama is such an expensive medium, it's unlikely *Outrageous* could continue without the support of New Zealand On Air, which has largely funded the upcoming season. And with stiff competition for the New Zealand On Air-dollar and funding considered series-by-series, there are no guarantees.

Says Lang: "With the network showing such a strong commitment, it'd be hard for New Zealand On Air to be seen as the bad guy."

Responds NZ On Air CEO Jane Wrightson: "Provided the series remains a hit with viewers, has an adequate broadcaster contribution, and continues to meet NZ On Air's priorities for quality and diversity, we are likely to continue our support. We've been delighted with the series so far and have our fingers crossed for the new season."

So there's still hope we'll see a new generation of Wests grow up. Grins Malcolm: "The minute we turn into *Desperate Housewives* will be the time to quit."

Outrageous Fortune returns to TV3 on Tuesday, June 17.