

Foxy morons a rare bridge over chasm between nation's two tribes

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Opinion

Nigel Bowen

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Unique position ... *Kath & Kim* may be the only force capable of uniting the educated and the aspirational politically.

An armful of Logies and AFI awards. Four top-rating TV series and an American adaptation. And now a film that is capable of actually luring Australians to the multiplex. In terms of Australian comic creations, Kath Day-Knight and Kim Craig are in the pantheon alongside Dame Edna and "Crocodile" Dundee. But why?

Comedians simply do not have that kind of impact without expertly massaging the hopes, fears and prejudices of a significant proportion of the population. I would argue the key to the foxy morons' success has been their ability to appeal, for very different reasons, to two crucial demographics. The descriptors applied to these two groups are frequently pejorative so, for diplomacy's sake, let's refer to them as the aspirationalists and the educated.

Their supposed identifying features are so well recognised as to barely need reiterating: the aspirationalists own suburban McMansions, make a good living as tradies or driving trucks around remote mine sites and were John Howard's battlers. The educated are white-collar professionals in inner-city latte belts and are left-leaning, or at least socially liberal. The chasm between the two tribes is the fault line around which much of Australia's politics is organised.

It is hard to believe now, but when *Kath & Kim* took off there was some hand-wringing among the educated as to whether it was appropriate to be laughing at the aspirationalists. Gina Riley's response at the time - that *Kath & Kim* wasn't about "mocking the disadvantaged" and the characters were "aspirational people, doing quite well, thank you. For them it's not an economic issue, it's just a case of bad taste and, of course, a lot of people with money have bad taste" - encapsulates why her show manages to appeal so effectively to two audiences with otherwise divergent viewing habits.

In real life, Turner and Riley are Prue and Trude rather than Kath and Kim. Riley, the daughter of a psychiatrist, trained as a classical singer and dated Nick Cave's bass player. Turner is married to the chief executive of top-tier law firm Corrs Chambers Westgarth. Both were professionally successful and presumably well remunerated long before *Kath & Kim*. After its success, they are millionaires several times over. They may not be snobs but they are definitely voyeurs rather than participants when it comes to the suburban milieu they are parodying.

Over the last decade and a half, the educated have had to make the painful adjustment to living in a society where aspirationalists often out-earn them and largely determine the political agenda. Like galled aristocrats confronted by a rising merchant class, their typical response has been to snigger at the tastelessness of the newly affluent. *Kath & Kim* does this more gently than much of the "cashed-up bogan" comedy but it still does it. The malapropisms, mispronunciations and mixed metaphors of the characters allow the university-educated to chuckle at those who don't understand the hilarious implications of wanting to be affluent rather than affluent. Many of them would see Kim - bloated by junk food, addicted to tabloid media, bedazzled by hyper-consumerism, utterly self-absorbed - as a portrayal rather than a grotesque caricature.

So what's in it for aspirationalists? Well, no doubt they are also having a laugh at the over-the-top gaucheness of the characters but they are also having a self-deprecating laugh at themselves.

While the educated like to think that only the type of people who attend David Williamson plays are sufficiently resilient to cope with seeing themselves

satirised, most people enjoy it.

Perhaps the biggest drawback for aspirational fans is simply that it is a rare, keenly observed and largely positive representation of their culture, a world where people may be daggy but are also, by and large, decent.

Kath & Kim may be the only force capable of uniting the educated and the aspirational politically.

The show first aired in the months after the Tampa election, which established Howard's dominance, and wound up about the time he lost office.

Kath & Kimderella, set in a fictional European principality and structured around an awkward melange of fairytale plots, suggests Turner and Riley have found nothing to work with during the Rudd-Gillard years.

But, having been provided with such rich pickings during the aspirational golden age of the Howard era, they might just feel inspired to write another series if the purveyors of fine meats and purveyors of fine sentiments can propel Tony Abbott, the self-proclaimed "political love child" of the former prime minister, into The Lodge.

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»If loathing Kath and Kim makes me a snob, then halleluiah I'm a snob. I loathe bogans, tabloid media, pokies, clubs, McMansions and "footy" bores the living daylight out of me. Building a bridge? I don't think so, particularly if you are derided as a humourless sourpuss if you day to suggest that the chattering classes darlings are not funny.«

»«

Uncle Quentin | September 26, 2012, 9:14AM

“ »«

*»Your not a snob, just a crazy old grump. Do you have more cats than friends? No analytical skills, or understanding of that word? Maybe just no sense of humor?
Cheer up guy, it may never happen.«*

»«

Matt | Sydney September 26, 2012, 11:55AM

“ »«

»Matt as a long time fan of the Goons, Monty Python, et al and an admirer of Turner and Riley's work on Fast Forward I dispute the no sense of humour accusation. Just because all of the critics like it, don't mean nothing; I don't find it funny and none of your sneering sarcasm is going to make me change my mind.«

»«

Uncle Quentin | September 26, 2012, 12:50PM

“ »«

*»I agree, Uncle! I loath Kath & Kim. They are not funny. Not in the least.
»And I do like comedy, just not that kind. I also don't like fart jokes, Will Farrell , Ben Stiller or any of that mob.«
»K&K are rubbish, plain and simple.«*

»«

tessie | September 26, 2012, 2:11PM

“ »«

*»I suspect I might be an educated aspirational. I have a degree, but I find David Williamson plays tiresome.«
»I enjoy a slight superior snigger at the antics of Kath & Kim, and then I realise they are parodying just a few of my own social characteristics.«
»I don't enjoy seeing "Hoi Viz" fluro clothing in Qantas Club, so I probably am a bit of a snob when it comes to cashed up Bogans. However, I did enjoy the episode in which Kath and Kel tried to sneak into Qantas Club with a Video Ezy membership card.«
»I think Kath & Kim is indeed a bridge between the educated and the aspirational... but some of us probably live on the bridge between both camps.«*

»«

Nick | Melbourne September 26, 2012, 10:46AM

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»I loved that episode, especially as we stayed at the airport overnight once due to a mistake about dates. Kel's head rising up from between the rows of chairs had us in absolute stitches!!!«

»«

GS | September 26, 2012, 1:48PM

»«

»Aren't all Australians aspirational? We are the descendants of transported convicts, Royal Marines, sailors and prostitutes. The successful chose to stay in the UK, not hop on a boat to a colony. And that was just the first fleet. The followers were economic or political refugees from England or Ireland. The better class of immigrants went to the USA or Canada. In the 20th century the immigrants were refugees from various wars. All of them aspired to a better life.«

»What, in any event, is wrong with being aspirational? If it means working hard to have a decent life, give your kids a decent education and live in a nice home with a yard, shouldn't it be applauded? Some aspirationalists may be bad mannered but Lord, some people I have met on the North Shore or Eastern Suburbs of Sydney give a new meaning to poor behaviour.«

»If Kath and Kim were second generation Vietnamese immigrants, they would be lauded for their success.«

»I for one prefer visiting my friends in their 4 bedroom "McMansions" with pool and swing set than visiting a terrace and trying to find parking in the gentrified slums of the inner city.«

»«

Andrew | Sydney September 26, 2012, 12:34PM

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»There is a difference between these two groups in the way they are portrayed and view themselves but not that much when they have had a few beers or chardonnay's.«

»I have to say I am put off by both extremes of each type - the bogan (of which I consider myself a docile member) that can not see life from others point of view and the so called liberal who thinks they are so much smarter and well refined than their fellow Australian.«

»Anyway I look forward to nothing other than sitting on my verandah spinning yarns to my mates while downing frothy beers and talking football. I hope this does not offend too many other humans residing in this country.«

»P.S. Kath & Kim's fatal flaw is it is just not that funny.«

»«

Hotdog! | Melbourne September 26, 2012, 1:58PM

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»@Hotdog- yep, you are right, Kath and Kim aren't that funny - but neither are the bogans or the so-called liberal lefties. There is actually another group (or at least one other group) out in the community who don't belong to either the bogans or the equally brain-dead latte sippers who laugh at both of you.«

»«

Stop the rot | September 26, 2012, 3:46PM

»«

»"The show first aired in the months after the Tampa election, which established Howard's dominance, and wound up about the time he lost office."«

»I had no idea that they were able to define the characters, write the episodes and shoot the script between Tampa and its airing. Nice work. Or is that some suggestion of a cause-effect you're trying to find that doesn't really exist. And wound up above the same time? Yeah, they just waited until they thought they knew the election result and stopped writing, filming and producing. It's all intertwined in ways that's hard to understand. Contracts weren't part it - you know, those things signed a year or more in advance.«

»Anyway, the show was rubbish: as an 'educated' person (I suppose that's where I sit) I found no joy in watching apparent 'aspirationalists' make asses of themselves with what they said and did. It's a shame Australians can't aspire to more cultural advancement than the oft-jibed bogan: Croc Dundee, the 'tell 'em they're dreamin' guy' from The Castle, what-is-name from CrackerJack, etc... Why can't Australians, the absence of about 2 films, ever be willing to see themselves as wanting to be more than dooper but adorable half-wits?«

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MikeB | September 26, 2012, 1:59PM

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