

Sunday Herald Sun

AUGUST 12, 2007

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**Guy Pearce
shares his
art and soul**

**Celebrity tips
for winter skin**

**Snoozing
with the big
cats of Africa**

THE ODD COUPLE

WHY GINA AND JANE ARE JUST DAGS AT HEART

Matthew Johns
Lisa Hensley
Lady Julia Morris
Camilla Freeman



The Kath + Kim code

EVEN WITHOUT THEIR
TRADEMARK BAD PERMS AND
VISIBLE G-STRINGS, GINA RILEY
AND JANE TURNER ARE JUST
AS ENTERTAINING AS THEIR
FOUNTAIN LAKES ALTER EGOS

STORY JOANNE HAWKINS
PHOTOGRAPHY CAMERON GRAYSON

Jane Turner and Gina Riley are nervous. They may be two of the most successful women – no, make that, people – on Australian television, whose much-loved show *Kath & Kim* is now screened in 11 countries but, today, the pair are distinctly uncomfortable. It's a case of "don't look at moiee".

Turner and Riley have reluctantly agreed to be photographed and interviewed as themselves – as opposed to alter egos Kath Day-Knight and Kim Craig. They're promoting their new series, the first since they jumped into the Barina and moved from the ABC to the Seven Network. And they admit that they find it hard when they can't hide behind Kath's high-waisted jeans and Kim's bumsters and G-strings.

"It's hard to know what to do; how to come across," admits the softly spoken Turner. "We totally love dressing up as funny characters and hiding behind other people, because it's so much easier. I know exactly how Kath acts; she could be Prime Minister and she'd know what to do, whereas I wouldn't have a clue.

"I just try to smile and look to camera and look pretty," she continues, smoothing down a strand of her short, blonde and very-straight hair. "You can't try to be too serious, though, because you just look like a w**ker if you do that."

Riley snorts with laughter – a common occurrence – then adds, "Even though we're comedians, we're not in any way wacky or zany. It's beyond difficult, excruciating even, [to do this]."

Excruciating or not, there's no mucking around with these two, who have politely, but firmly, kept the shoot moving along at a cracking pace. You can see how they balance being mums (Turner has a daughter, 10, and two sons, 18 and 15; and Riley has a 10-year-old daughter) with their roles as creators, writers, executive producers and – not forgetting – stars of one of Australia's most successful comedy series ever. But they insist their lives haven't changed that much since *Kath & Kim* brought them international fame (at least in those countries where the show has aired, such as the US, UK and, more bizarrely, Finland and Sweden).

"We've had to do a lot more photoshoots," quips 46-year-old Turner, "but it's been fantastic. Having success makes you more relaxed and happier – and not so ambitious."

"Yes, it's not like a burning thing any more – like I have to do something," agrees Riley, also 46. "And I don't know if that's an age thing or having had some success, but I do feel more relaxed. And it's been fun, too, having a turn at [success]. Because our turn will end sooner rather than later, probably, but it's fun while it lasts.

"And having a success with one of your best friends is the most fantastic feeling in the world, because you're both experiencing exactly the same thing together."

Interviewing Turner and Riley is a bit like watching a game of tennis – coincidentally Riley's current passion. ("I love it. It's my new craze," she enthuses.) The pair are so relaxed with each other that they constantly talk over each other and finish one another's sentences. They frequently descend into hoots of laughter, lapsing into Kath and Kim's familiar voices and struggling to remain serious for



“Having success with one of your best friends is the most fantastic feeling in the world”

too long. As Glenn Robbins, who plays Kath's man-bag-carrying husband, Kel, in *Kath & Kim* says, "The girls are always only a breath away from bursting into laughter. It's always on the edge 99 per cent of the time."

But then, they've been making each other laugh for a very long time. They met aged "17 and 18" (Turner is older by six months) when the star-struck teenagers both attended St Martins Youth Arts Centre in Melbourne's South Yarra. But they didn't hit it off immediately. "We didn't really like each other at first," admits Riley.

"When I first saw Gina, she had the lead part in a musical and I was like, 'Why has she got the lead?'" remembers Turner. "But then she started singing and I was like, 'OK, she can be the lead.' So it was as if we were eyeing each other off at first, but we became friends pretty soon after that.

We were both on the same wavelength with the jokes from the start."

"Yes, we've definitely had the same sense of humour from day one," agrees Riley.

That sense of humour has been the backbone of their relationship over the years. "But we also complement each other with our different skills," says Turner. "I think you're more 'big picture' whereas I'm big on little detail."

"You don't remember anybody or anything, but then you remember these really funny little details," laughs Riley, the slightly more gregarious of the two.

"And Gina's probably more assertive than me," adds Turner. "But I'm more buzzy and busy. That's probably related to having three kids and having had them earlier. When you have children, there are always a million things going on in your head at the same time, but [Gina's] getting more like that >

Gina wears: Country Road silk top; Kailis cluster silver and pearl earrings. Jane wears: her own clothes.

“The idea that we sit at a lofty height laughing at the masses is ridiculous”

since she had her daughter. I've always been a fast metabolism-type person.”

“Yeah, that's why I'm fat and you're thin,” says Riley, dissolving into peals of laughter.

The pair say they never argue. “We don't really fight at all,” says Riley. “I think *Kath & Kim* happened at a good time for us; we're a bit older and more willing to hear somebody else's opinion, which might not have happened 10 years ago.”

“Our egos don't get in the way,” agrees Turner. “We've learnt it's much better to be in synch and work together. It's a trust thing. Because [*Kath & Kim*] has worked, we ultimately trust each other. We've obviously hit on some magic formula, which we don't want to ruin, so we do everything we can to protect it. You don't want to buggery it up.”

Having both decided they wanted to be performers at a very young age (“As far back as I can remember, that was always my first love,” says Turner), the pair gravitated towards comedy, honing their skills in Melbourne's theatre restaurants and comedy clubs before graduating to TV. Apart from Turner's not-so-comic short spell on *Prisoner* in the early '80s, the pair became synonymous with sketch comedy in shows such as *Fast Forward*, *Full Frontal*, *Big Girl's Blouse* and *Something Stupid*. They soon became famous for their comic characters (Turner's Russian TV presenter Svetta and Bobbie Battista from CNN were standouts) and sharp send-ups of personalities including Paula Abdul and Kerri-Anne Kennerly (Riley) and Ita Buttrose (Turner).

Actor John Clarke, who starred with Riley in the Sydney Olympics spoof *The Games*, says Seven's *Big Girl's Blouse* – which featured Riley, Turner and



Magda Szubanski – was groundbreaking at the time. “*Big Girl's Blouse* was a remarkable achievement. It was a brilliant show and one of the first that was written by, for and about women. They were very brave. A lot of people won't do the things they do on national television because of vanity. But they were making themselves look ugly, fat and vile, and they were up for that because they have loved making one another laugh for a very long time.”

It was on *Big Girl's Blouse*, which aired in 1995, that the characters of Kath and Kim Day (as they were then), plus Kim's ‘second-best friend’ Sharon, first saw the light of... um, day. They proved such a hit that Turner and Riley later decided to flesh out the characters and write a TV series about them.

“The characters had had a very good response from the few people that saw them [on *Big Girl's Blouse*],” says Turner. “So, we thought it definitely

had legs. And we were happy and confident writing it. It was never a struggle.”

But it was definitely a struggle for the show to get up and running. Signed by the ABC, the show was dropped three days before production was due to begin in 2001. But the girls refused to accept it. Remembers Turner: “We had this phone call saying they had decided not to go ahead with *Kath & Kim* and we were like, ‘What?... Anyway, Gina, what were we saying about this script?’ We just kept going. We were too far down the track and had such faith in it.”

Adds Riley: “We just felt it should be given a go. Not that [we thought] it was going to be hugely successful – just that it should be given a go.”

Luckily the ABC changed its mind. And just as well; the day-to-day life of the 50-something empty-nester (Kath) and her spoiled daughter (Kim), and their respective spouses Kel (the ‘great hunk o’ spunk’) and Brett, in the fictional Melbourne suburb

of Fountain Lakes, was an instant hit after it first aired in May 2002. Soon, a collection of Kath and Kim's catchphrases such as “Look at moiee” and “Very ny-ioce”, plus the show's infamous malapropisms (such as Kim's “I want to be affluent, Mum” or Kath's hunger cry, “I'm ravishing”) entered the mainstream.

But the show wasn't without its detractors. Some critics were offended by its portrayal of suburban life. “The first reviews were terrible,” laughs Riley. “One said, ‘It's got terrible lines, such as: Does it make me a crim to keep myself trim, Kim?’ We thought, why is that so terrible? We still think it's quite funny.”

The pair refute the suggestion they're being cruel about people in the suburbs. “It's totally affectionate,” continues Turner. “We're not poking fun at anyone. There's no one in the show, besides Sharon, who is particularly tragic. They're proud of themselves, they look after themselves, they're happy.”

“It's our own lives. Everything that happens to us, we put into that show.”

“Yes, the idea that we sit at a lofty height laughing at the masses is ridiculous,” agrees Riley. “Because we wouldn't be able to tap into it in that

way if we were that removed.”

After three series and a telemovie with the ABC, the Seven Network announced in April that it had secured the rights to air the fourth series of *Kath & Kim* for a reported \$3 million. And while you might say that's a “ny-ioce little earner” for Turner and Riley, they say it just “seemed the right time to go” and that there was no animosity from the ABC.

“There were some things that we really wanted to do with the new series, such as a trip away, and we could never afford to do it,” says Riley. “The ABC wanted to [put money into] nurturing new programs and Seven seemed to be the way to go because that's where we started – that's where Kath and Kim were born.”

As ever, Turner and Riley are tight-lipped about what will happen in the next series (“We'd have to kill you if we told you,” says Riley.) But what is >

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