



Satire in the SPOTLIGHT

As they turn their attention from screen to stage, **Sue Yeap** asks Chas Licciardello and Julian Morrow what's next for The Chaser

You can just imagine the scenes of hand-wringing and teeth-gnashing at the ABC when The Chaser announced it would not return to TV for at least the first half of this year to instead tour a stage show.

Last year was a watershed for the members of the satirical comedy team who started their careers with The Chaser newspaper in 1999 and moved to ABC TV with The Election Chaser in 2001.

The paper is now defunct but its spirit lives on at The Chaser website (www.thechaser.com.au) and in

the popular Chaser annual, which had record crowds lining up at pre-Christmas book signings.

In fact, 2007 could be summed up as the year of The Chaser, the year the team finally crossed from cult to mainstream success.

Aided by a plum 9pm timeslot, the second season of The War on Everything was one of the most watched shows on any network, averaging 1.45 million viewers every Wednesday — up 134 per cent on the 619,000 viewers who tuned in to series one, late on Friday nights during 2006.

A peak audience of 2.29 million

tuned in to see footage of their infamous breach of the APEC restricted zone by a fake motorcade in September; the resulting court case has been delayed until next month.

The Chaser's WOE was the ABC's highest-rating comedy since 1991 and almost nine million Chaser vodcasts (video podcasts) were downloaded last year. An edited version of the WOE has also been sold internationally.

Their stunts and pranks, often at the expense of politicians and celebrities, regularly made headlines and sparked



→ something of a frenzy among TV current affairs shows.

With the WOE on an indefinite hiatus it remains to be seen what Auntie will use to fill its popular Wednesday night comedy slot.

But those willing to get off the sofa will be able to catch The Chaser's irreverent blend of satire, sketches, stunts and song when they bring two different shows to Perth.

First stop is the Perth International Arts Festival, where Julian Morrow and Dominic Knight will appear as guests of the Perth Writers Festival.

Knight was a founder of The Chaser with Morrow, Craig Reucassel and Charles Firth and went to high school with Chas Licciardello. In recent years he has concentrated on writing for The Chaser rather than appearing on TV.

The Chaser Files will give audiences an insight into how the team perform their brazen stunts and the chance to ask questions — the bad news is the show sold out weeks ago.

Knight and Morrow will also appear at the Perth Writers Festival sessions Writer as Activist on February 22 and The Serious Business of Being Funny on February 23.

In April the whole TV team, with Knight standing in for Chris Taylor, return with The Chaser's Age of Terror Variety Hour.

Licciardello says he would love to reveal what will be in the show but can't — it's not so much a closely guarded secret as an unwritten script that prevents him from doing so.

"I'll get back to you when we have written one word of it," he jokes.

"The only thing we are writing at the moment is 500 lines of, 'I am so glad I am on holidays'."

The Chaser's last major east →

→ coast stage show was 2005's Cirque du Chaser. Much of it became the basis for The War on Everything, so fans may get an early indication of what their next TV series could be like.

"It will be a series of unconnected segments that reflects the best collection of ideas, songs and sketches," says Morrow.

Although the aim is to write a new TV show while touring The Age of Terror, Morrow says there is no guarantee we will see the team back on air at all this year.

After regularly working 16-hour days, seven days a week, they ended 2007 exhausted.

"I think if we took a binding vote now of everyone on the team whether or not to come back and do more War it would be five-zero against," Morrow admits.

"It's very easy to say we should do a totally new format that will be innovative and brilliant and magically successful and that we will be able to sell around the world.

"That's a lovely idea but what actually is the show? We haven't really cracked that one yet."

In a team of pranksters not averse to bailing up anyone, Licciardello is regarded as the naughtiest of the

naughty. He got on the wrong side of the law in 2006 by trying to sell fake weapons to fans of Sydney rugby team the Canterbury Bulldogs and emerged from the APEC motorcade dressed as Osama bin Laden.

Yet Licciardello says performing potentially dangerous stunts on TV is nowhere near as scary as on radio

"With TV there are always three cameras and a sound guy everywhere you go," he says.

"Whereas with radio you are just walking around with a hidden microphone under your shirt looking like a weirdo, so you get into a lot more dangerous situations."

Last year Licciardello had a knife held to his throat by a busker who had been asked to move on because he was being replaced by a poker machine, like live bands were in many clubs.

The busker initially seemed happy enough but took umbrage when told it was all a stunt for The Chaser. The scene did not make it to air.

"He just totally flipped out, he pulled out a knife, held it to my neck, started dragging me around all over the place, that was a little scary," Licciardello says.

"Jules helped no end by standing there doing absolutely nothing so I just talked him down like you would a rabid dog to be honest; 'easy, easy, down'."

Despite his boisterous screen persona, Licciardello doesn't drive and confesses to being a nerd. He says

his wife has nothing to fear from The Chaser's new-found female following who call themselves "the fan girls".

"She knows I am mostly attracted to computers and American political blogs so I have a natural contraceptive there as far as the ladies go."

There has been a lot of talk of The Chaser defecting to a commercial network, making a movie or moving to America. Licciardello will believe it when he sees it.

"Since the second we started TV, and I think this is just the nature of TV, we



have had lots of people with big dreams and big suggestions talking it up, telling us 'You can make a movie and make a million dollars here and you can conquer the world',” he says.

“The net result is I will believe it when they give us a contract; until then it is all bullshit.”

While last year's ratings success was a pleasant surprise to all concerned, there's one thing Licciardello still

there's one thing Licciardello still doesn't get: “The thing that was the big surprise to me was the news coverage, the number of times all year we were in the news.

“I still don't understand why. We are a comedy show, we are not news. It has become amazing the hype. That really surprised me. That is also why...a little bit of the reason we are taking some time off, it's been a little bit crazy.”

The Chaser's Age of Terror Variety Hour is at His Majesty's Theatre from April 14-19. Tickets from BOCS. The Chaser Files show at The Octagon as part of the Perth International Arts Festival on February 22 has sold out. Perth Writers Festival tickets are available in packs through BOCS or single sessions may be available at the door for \$10.

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