



Andrew Denton

January 1997

ANDREW DENTON MAY BE ONE of the funniest people in Australia. Certainly he's one of the smallest. To his partner Jennifer Byrne, he's one of the smartest, which in her scheme of things means sexiest. 'I love big brain,' she says. 'He does big brain in a really good way . . . and he makes me laugh.' As for Denton, he regards himself as one of the ugliest. 'I am like a bowel,' he once said. 'Ugly but functional.'

Brainy, ugly or sexy, it's a miracle Andrew Denton is with us at all. At birth, after a difficult passage, he was given the last rites. At eight, he nearly set fire to the Blue Mountains. At nine, he ran away from home. At 15, he contemplated suicide. At 17, he was masturbating so hard he nearly changed sex. At 24, he was going crazy making videos for Prudential Insurance and trying to make them look like episodes from *The Twilight Zone*.

Salvation came in the form of Doug Mulray, who met him in the mid-1980s and thought he was a very strange man, a cross between John Travolta and a gherkin. He hired him as his 'Boy Genius' sidekick on Sydney's Triple M radio—Denton's first big break, at the age of 26. The Brain had found a home. Then, in 1987, the ABC was looking for someone to host a new national program, aptly called *Blah Blah Blah*. They wanted someone unpredictable. Denton walked into the audition, kicked a chair across the room and then proceeded to tease and parody his way through the interview. He got the job.

After six years with the national broadcaster, commercial television snatched him—body and mind, say the purists—for a new variety show that was to have lasted another five years. Two years later, completely burnt out, Denton put his brain in a jar and went home for a year, during

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which time he turned down offers most people would kill for. Now, he's trying to find the jar again.

His first mischievous steps towards re-employment were taken after Triple M approached him last year about a job. Denton was invited to a meeting with three station executives at a hotel in Sydney's Darling Harbour. It was the standard conference room—tea and coffee facilities and little place-sets with notepads and pencils.

Denton was the first to arrive and, as he had nothing else to do, went around the table writing notes about himself on all the pads. 'Gee he's great.' 'Must give him the most money available.' 'Drop everything! Hire this guy . . .' Then, with a poker face, he sat down, waited for the meeting to start and watched as his prospective employers began discovering the messages with a sense of mounting uncertainty. 'Did you write this note? Did I? Did he?' They hired him anyway—to host its revamped breakfast show, one which Denton promises 'will stain my copybook forever'.

Andrew Denton loves to shock you out of complacency. To shock you with humour. Never mind where he happens to be. When he was negotiating his employment package with the Seven Network in late 1993, he leapt on top of the board table and, in front of a gaggle of station executives and lawyers, proceeded to march up and down while making his point.

'It's a good way of just sorting out what people are like,' he muses. 'Because, of course, if they completely freeze and can't handle it, it's a pretty good indication that we're not going to work well together.'

People still recall the joke he told at the glittering media launch of ABC-TV's program line-up for 1990, to introduce his then boss David Hill: 'David Hill is going to work one day and he gets in the David Hill lift and goes up to the David Hill suite. The lift makes an unscheduled stop on the third floor and in walks a very attractive blonde who David has never seen before . . . The woman obviously doesn't work for the ABC because she is not carrying anything in triplicate. She and David Hill look at each other and she says, "David Hill?" And he says, "Yes." And she says, "I'd like to suck your cock." And this is the mark of the man—David Hill looks at her and says, "Yes . . . fine, but what's in it for me?" . . . Ladies and gentlemen, I give you David Hill.'

For a strangled moment, you could actually feel the oxygen leave the room. 'Oh Andrew, how could you?' cried a woman in the audience. And then there was absolute uproar as the spotlight turned on David Hill who, to his eternal credit, stood there looking like he, too, had found the joke hilarious.

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THE UNUSUAL VISAGE OF ANDREW Denton has been infiltrating its way into the public consciousness for the past nine years. It began as the weedy guy with glasses wearing the baggy shorts and runners in *Blah Blah Blah*, an anarchic program of comedy, satire and serious exploration which, by its own definition, was so bad 'even Bert Newton wouldn't want to appear on it'. It was anti-television—a place where 'intellectual debate could go right into the second hour'. It was organised—or disorganised—chaos with Denton adlibbing his way through the middle. It never rated above four.

Then came Denton in *The Money or the Gun*, a script-driven variety show which had him doing sketch comedy, vox pops and interviews, as well as investigating—with that peculiar slant of his—wildly diverse subjects. He tackled cooking (*The Evil World of Insects* . . . 'and next week, how to sauté a wasp in its own poison'), social psychology (Denton as Alice in Sheilaland drinking chromosomal girly-curler and turning into a woman) and defence, with Denton calling the Pentagon for its views on humour: 'My name is Andrew Denton from ABC Television in Australia. We're currently recording you for a television show we're doing about comedy around the world. We're interested to know how comedy affects the day-to-day life of the Pentagon? Pentagon: I can't hear you, what did you say? Denton: Wasn't that your excuse in Vietnam? I'm interested to know how . . . Hello? Hello?'

'When I came into television,' Denton says, 'I was so bolshie because I really thought we have seen the same old tired 40 or 50 faces appearing on each other's shows for years and years and, really, isn't it time somebody of my generation stood up and said, "God we're bored. We want something else." I didn't feel this Messianic sense of "It has to be me," but if nobody else is going to do it, I've got the opportunity. I'm going to rock the boat . . . and I think that goes to the heart of people's ambivalence about me. I think I've always been a great polariser.' (Denton has received the odd death threat, been physically attacked and was once accused of trying to bring down 2,000 years of civilisation.)

But never let it be said the man was all mischief and mirth. For all his unlimited comic skill and ability to adlib, there was always serious content in what he did—and a serious concern behind it, as his television specials on psychiatry, cancer, depression and disability demonstrated. He could demystify and humanise a difficult subject while making you double up at the same time. 'He puts a spinnaker up, sails right around, asks questions other people would baulk at, shakes the boat a fair deal and still gets laughs,' satirist John Clarke once said. 'He runs a wonderful commando raid.'

His disability special, for example, was called *The International Year of the Patronising Bastard* and it won for him and the ABC the 1991 United

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Nations Media Peace Prize. 'He was able to deal with the people in a way that was audacious, breathtaking and defied the norms of society,' says Ted Robinson, former head of ABC comedy. 'It changed the way people talk about these issues. How could you ask for more?'

The fact that the show originated from a monumental faux pas during the recording of another program only made the television, as far as Denton was concerned, more genuine. 'I saw a girl right up the back who I thought was asleep,' he recalls. 'She was sitting there, head down, eyes closed, and I thought this very amusing that somebody would come to the show and fall asleep. So I started chatting to the audience as I was making my way up to her: "There's somebody asleep, let's find out what exactly has sent her to sleep. What's bored her so much that she has nodded off?" And then as I got closer she lifted her head but her eyes were still closed and I suddenly realised, she's not asleep, she's blind.'

'And I remember thinking: there are two ways to go here. Do the standard thing which is to be all embarrassed and apologetic and fumbling and "Oh terribly sorry, you're blind, you're wonderful people, just tremendous that you could even be here and I hope you enjoy watching . . . oh God, did I say *watching*?"'

'I could do all that stumbling stuff or I could just keep barrelling on. So I said . . . "Oh no. You're not asleep, you're blind! How dare you come here as a blind person and pretend to be asleep. Don't you realise what sort of situation that puts me in?"'

IT WOULD BE EASY TO sketch a portrait of the little nerd who was bullied at school, humiliated at home, and then ventured out into life with only his wits as defence. You know, the smart clown with the aching heart who uses humour for protection or as a device for winning friends.

Trouble is, bits of it are true, bits aren't. There's no doubt Andrew Denton has always regarded himself as 'the archetypal unattractive man'—despite what many have told him—and that he has used this self-image as a wonderful comic device. 'As with a lot of people who do comedy, my attitude is: get in first,' he says.

It was only his love of sport that managed to save him from ignominy. 'I should have fulfilled the stereotype of the nerd that hangs with nerds but I've always deeply loved and always been passionately involved with sport. So even though I don't drink a lot and I'm not a pub sort of guy, because I like playing sport, watching it, talking about it, laughing about it, it's been a passport to just about everything in Australian male life.'

Sports people can also be hilariously funny, as the ABC's satirical sports

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show *Live and Sweaty* proved indisputably. 'The reason things like [the Nine Network's] *The Footy Show* can exist today,' Denton says, 'is because of *Live and Sweaty*. Because when we started doing *Live and Sweaty* [after *The Money or the Gun*] the people we had on the show didn't realise they were allowed to be—and could be—entertainers. They were sports people, that was their role in society and nobody saw them as anything different.'

There are no easy clichés with Andrew Denton. His partner Jennifer Byrne, a former *60 Minutes* journalist and now publishing director of Reed Books, says: 'He is not just a one-dimensional funnyman with the dark side that everybody has portrayed him as. He is a true person with oddities and contradictions and good points and bad points.'

'He's a gentle person. Underneath all the smarts and all that kind of intellectual toughness and protectiveness is a vulnerable person. You ask why do I love him? Because he's got real courage. He's really brave. He is doing what he wants in the way he is doing it. He is a demanding person. He can be feisty. He can be dark. And I think people see that and they think, "God, he's so prickly," and he can be, but he can also be so gentle—if you could ever get some way of tapping that.'

One way of tapping that, of course, is to ask Denton about his immediate family, which I do when we first meet in a bar near his home in Sydney's Lower North Shore. Typically, he doesn't hand you the pearls without the badinage. Of his and Byrne's two-year-old son, Connor, he says: 'He's very pretty. He's blond and got blue eyes and if I ever find the father I'm going to kill him.' In all seriousness, though, he is smitten by his child.

Ask him what Byrne has given his life and he replies: 'No sex. She won't have sex with me. She finds me physically repugnant, but beyond that Jennifer is everything I'm not. She is really classy. She is genuinely intelligent in that she has got deep knowledge, not just the dilettante's knowledge. She's a light person. She seeks the light, whereas I tend to seek the dark. And she's a woman. All those things I'll probably never be.'

Andrew Denton in person is not unlike the Andrew Denton you see on television—black, crackling wit, plenty of self-deprecation and a deep social conscience. What becomes more apparent off-screen, however, is that he is not one of those funnymen who feel the need to be 'on' all the time. Quite the contrary. Denton is a wintry spirit who just happens to be hysterically funny a lot of the time. He loves a quiet exchange of ideas, cherishes his solitude and refuses to turn the humour on simply because it's expected of him.

It is either fortunate or unfortunate that I've met him after the fog. The

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demons are less evident. He's rested from his year off; thrilled about his return to radio; and still self-congratulatory enough about his relationship with Byrne for it to be totally disarming. He confesses she has transformed his life, as well as sustained it during his most despondent periods. 'She is wild at heart, I am wild at mind,' he says.

Their courtship was as romantic as it was unexpected. Byrne had been separated from her husband for only two weeks and Denton from his girlfriend for just over a month when they met at a Sydney Opera House rally in 1990 to save the Fairfax newspaper empire from Kerry Packer.

Although their versions vary slightly, both agree that Denton, then in his holier-than-thou ABC mode, was extremely rude to Byrne, who was then with *60 Minutes*, about the corrupting influence of commercial television. Byrne demanded an apology; Denton says he offered one freely. Whichever the case, rancour soon gave way to enchantment as they began to talk. And talk. And talk . . .

'It was the best courtship you could possibly have,' Denton says now. 'She had to go to Adelaide to shoot something [the day after the rally] . . . I had gone out that night so I raced home to call her and we spoke for eight hours on the phone. And I called her the next night and we spoke for five hours. We essentially seduced each other over the phone and from that weekend on we were together. It was the perfect seduction because there was nothing physical involved. It was the seduction of personality and mind.'

By his own confession, Denton hasn't had a great history as a lover, though in his adulthood he came to realise women were attracted to more than just the physical. 'I just wish that was knowledge I'd got some years earlier so I had the confidence to indulge my desires. I tell you what though, I was a bloody good masturbator.'

Denton says that when he arrived at Mitchell College in Bathurst, NSW, to study communications at the age of 17, he was a 'terminal virgin'. He didn't know how to play the game. 'I didn't know how to make myself attractive and in that way I was lonely. I was basically like any red-blooded teenager. I really wanted a root but I didn't know how to get one.'

Ann Newton, a college friend of Denton's and now assistant international editor of ABC-TV news, says Denton was always making jokes about 'getting laid'. She recalls a party after the Christmas holidays when he walked up to her in a group of friends and said: 'Hi. Now can we have a root?'

'He always did this in front of a lot of people to ensure maximum embarrassment,' she says, laughing. 'I was horrified and he just stood there with a blank face. I think I just shuffled off.' Denton remembers it

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differently. 'I asked her to be my steady, my piece of skirt, and I'd be her piece of trousers. It took me a lot of courage to do that. Ann was very nice the way she turned me down. Something to do with a barge pole, not in a million years, and get out you horrible man.'

Newton says a lot of women would have liked to have slept with Denton at college, only they found him too intimidating. 'They would have thought after the root, "What are we going to talk about?"'

'They didn't have to talk,' Denton counters with mock rage. 'They could have just laid there and listened to me being incredibly grateful.'

THERE IS A SIDE TO Andrew Denton that is deeply contemplative. There is another side that is the jerk who wants to be liked; the guy who can't resist the crowd-pleasing one-liner. When Denton and I first spoke to each other by telephone it was to arrange a time and place to meet. I asked him where he'd be most comfortable doing the interview. 'Natassja Kinski's bedroom,' he replied, 'although she's never returned any of my letters.'

Part of the instant gag routine springs from an irrepressible current of humour, a mind that rarely switches off. And part of it stems from a desire to be in control, to 'get in first'. When I asked him, for instance, if I could speak to his parents, Kit and Le (Lenore) Denton, instead of giving me a flat refusal he shrewdly counter-traded with the offer of talking to Byrne. 'It's one or the other,' he said.

Denton brings an eccentric wit to almost everything he does. One of his more memorable moments in *Live and Sweaty* was when he parachuted for the first time. He plunged from 4,500 metres in tandem with a professional skydiver and two cameramen. Terrified though he was, he decided to take a book with him so that if things got boring on the way down he could catch up on some light reading. He took *The Oxford Book of Death*.

'I leapt out of the plane and the first four or five seconds were very scary and disorientating. And then once I'd kind of worked out where I was, I thought, "Right, get the book out," and I opened the book but of course I hadn't allowed for the fact that I was going down at whatever terminal velocity is and the book just flew out of my hands and stuck to my face. I'm freefalling with a book stuck to my face. And eventually I'm there thinking, "Fuck, it's stuck to my face, what do I do?" And I thought, "Just push it to one side, Andrew, gravity will take care of the rest."'

Andrew Denton has seemingly had an audacious spirit—and plenty of chutzpah—from the time he was a little boy. His older sister, Jo Denton,

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recalls the time their mother was chasing him up the stairs to give him a clip around the ears. The boy slowed, placed his glasses carefully in his mother's path, and then took off again knowing that she'd have to stop in order to not smash the glasses. 'He never did things by the book,' Jo says.

Although close friends now, Jo found her brother insular and moralistic when they were young. 'He used to lecture me and tell me what a terrible person I was. This was when I was about 13 and he was 11. My overwhelming sense of him then was that he was terribly goody-two-shoes and a righteous little prick.' (Denton says he will dispute this till the day he dies. 'Jo thought I disapproved of her far more than I did.')

What she came to realise also, though, was that her brother was simply not interested in following the crowd. Growing up in the Blue Mountains, with his friends scattered, he kept to himself. He kicked a football around the yard; he sat in his room for hours writing mournful poetry; he contemplated suicide. 'Yeah, I got miserable,' he says, 'but there was a kind of pleasure in that misery. Misery can be every bit the oxygen for your life as happiness or work.'

It's axiomatic to say that comedians are sensitive souls. They not only have to ferret for information and apply an intelligence to it, they also have to reinterpret life in a way that strikes at the human heart. Besides, being cheerful all the time is far stranger to Denton than being depressed.

'Bertolt Brecht once said: "He who laughs has not yet heard the news."' So yeah, I get unhappy sometimes. I get very black sometimes. I get really worn out sometimes, but then I work really hard. My head is my office. I'm never not at work, so there are times when I just have to shut down all the systems.

'And if you want the quote from the dark side, it is that the human condition is ultimately one of decay. There are times when I hear of environmental programs which are perfectly worthwhile and I just think, "This is pissing into a hurricane," because the entire history of the human race has been one of rape, pillage, war, destruction and move on.

'That's why I have a detachment. There is a part of me which truly views the world and me in that way. And there is another part of me that is very, very touched by the human condition. I find the human condition, when I think about it, incredibly sad.'

Late in the series of *The Money or the Gun*, Denton did a memorable program on cancer focusing on teenagers who had joined the support group CanTeen. Denton combined compassion, deft questioning and great dollops of humour to enable them to talk about their tumours, lumbar punctures, bone marrow explorations and chemotherapy in a

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way that was illuminating, heart-rending and, at times, highly amusing.

'I defy anyone to get humour out of a situation like that,' says Tom Gleisner, the well-known writer/performer/director. 'But Andrew was very funny, without it being at the expense of the kids.'

To this day, Denton regards the program as 'the purest television' he has done. 'It was real emotion. It was real doubt and fear. It's been the best thing I've ever done in television . . . I am not going to go into the details but it still has enormous emotional resonance with me.'

The details are that one of the most delightful and courageous characters in the program was a young man called David who died before the show went to air. Denton was devastated by his death and even now finds it almost impossible to discuss the subject. When he finally does, after being pressed, it is with a lump in his throat.

'I say this reluctantly because I don't want to betray a private moment, but if it ends up in the story and David's parents read it, it's actually very much a tribute to them. I will never forget this moment, but the night David died I was invited over to the hospital with his family there. I was invited to go in and say goodbye.

'First of all I remember being just shocked by the ravages of cancer. It was the first time, the only time in my life, that I've ever said goodbye to someone who is about to die. I couldn't believe they [his parents] were allowing me this privilege.

'And David obviously wasn't talking but I believed he could hear and I said some things to him and I said goodbye. There is nothing but truth in a moment like that and I kissed him and I left. I'll never forget that moment, nor the extraordinary generosity of his parents.

'For me it was an opportunity to experience emotions which I was not familiar with. I had not been through that. It sounds corny but it's true. With CanTeen . . . I've had a connection with life that I didn't previously have.'

IN HIS YOUTH, THE DENTON dinner table was a place to sharpen the tongue or shrink. Kit Denton, Andrew's father, was (and still is) an English Jew of Polish descent whose name had been changed from Ditkofsky. Kit Denton loved challenging his family to word games and punning competitions, a challenge only his son seemed to relish. Kit was a former ABC broadcaster who turned to writing books and film scripts. He told the late ABC presenter Andrew Olle in a joint interview with his son seven years ago that it was difficult being remembered only for the 'stunning success' of *The Breaker* (the basis of the film *Breaker Morant*)

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when he'd had, at that time, seven other books published. Reading between the lines, it also seemed he might have had some difficulty dealing with his son's success. At the very least, it suggested his father may have been the source of his sardonic humour . . .

Kit: I remember taking you into a studio once in Perth when you were very small.

Andrew: Oh, now we're going to get one of these when-you-were-a-little-boy stories. Go on.

Kit: Then you should grow up.

Andrew: I'm working on it.

Kit: You did this very good radio piece.

Andrew: Did I?

Kit: Yes, you peed and everyone heard it.

Andrew: I'm still doing it, but into pockets now.

Olle: What made you take him into a radio studio?

Kit: I was kind to animals all my life . . .

Denton vaguely recalls the interview, can understand how it leaves room for psychological speculation, but insists his father's caustic humour and strength of character never chafed. 'I've got a really good relationship with my father,' he says. 'It's never felt competitive to me.'

Denton's own sense of competitiveness is nowhere more apparent than in his comic one-upmanship. Ted Robinson says Denton's capacity for repartee is unique. 'He is the bright boy in school. He's got the wonderful mix of comedy with the killer instinct.'

Denton's friend, comedy writer Simon Dodd, says Denton excels at competitive banter. 'He is a great comedy writer, but the thing that comes through most is his ability to pull lines out of the air,' he says.

This ability to make people laugh does not translate into swaggering self-assurance, although, like any star, Denton recognises his own gifts. 'You've got to have a sense of bravado and confidence—"Fuck it if I die, I'm going to die in flames"—or else you'd never do it,' he says. 'But you've also got to have self-doubt or else you couldn't be finely tuned to your performance, to your audience, to your material and to the world at large.'

'I'm riddled with self-doubt. I probably shouldn't say this but I'm going to say it just to prove to people that I have a fragile ego like everybody else. I am often intrigued and puzzled and hurt that whenever there are retrospectives of Australian comedy, I am never in them. I often think,

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“Well, what have I been doing the last eight years? Were those people laughing or was it just some weird practical joke on me?”

Perhaps the reason for his omission is that Andrew Denton is far more than a comedian. He’s a satirist, social commentator, political observer and now, probably, one of the best interviewers in the country. Just as *World Series Debating* topped the ratings for the ABC, so too did Denton’s two interviews with Paul Keating and Kevin Costner, partly because he managed to lob grenades packed with comedy and comment at both of them.

‘How is it possible as Prime Minister to keep in touch with the battler?’ he asked Keating. ‘Is it a remote-sensing thing where members of your Caucus tell you about people they know who know real people, or do you go straight to the source and have lunch with John Laws?’

With Costner, the approach needed to be novel. Here was a Hollywood star who’d been interviewed so many times nothing seemed to faze him. That was until Denton pulled out a bow and arrow (à la *Robin Hood*), challenged him to a sword fight and then asked him, straight out, whether it was hard directing the nude scene in *Dances With Wolves* with no clothes on.

Costner: I don’t know . . . I . . . not . . . no-one . . . standing like that . . . you know, uh . . . this is terrible . . . I wasn’t comfortable doing it.

Denton: No, I bet.

Costner: No, I wasn’t. I should have just said it right off the top.

Denton: So let’s do a take two.

Costner [laughing bashfully]: Look, you’re humiliating me in front of a bunch of people. You gave me a bow that wouldn’t shoot. You acted like you were real brave . . .

Denton: So what are you going to do next?

Costner [laughing unashamedly]: I’m going to go pout over this interview. I’m going to go scream and call my lawyer. You’re dead. You are dead. You are barely ticking.

Denton: You think I’ll be killed from the change in your pocket?

Costner [laughing uproariously]: This was a great interview . . . I had great fun.

BEING FUNNY TAKES ITS TOLL. So does being famous. At the end of 1995, after two exhausting years with the Seven Network, Andrew Denton picked up his box of magic tricks and went home. It was the end of what some believed was a mistaken voyage into commercial television.

Denton bristles at any suggestion he should have stayed with the ABC

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or that the only worthwhile television is to be found on the ABC or SBS. 'I wouldn't want to be working at the ABC now,' he says. 'I spent six really good years there. My attitude to life is I don't want to look back when I'm old and think, "Why didn't I try that?"'

Besides, *Denton*, particularly in its second year, was either winning the ratings or coming second, but, more significantly, was appealing to its most important demographic, the 18- to 40-year-olds. He believes that in its format of interviews and live entertainment comedy, it was as good a television program as he'll ever do.

Who can forget, for example, the *Chase for Skase*, in which Denton galvanised thousands of viewers to join his campaign to bring the rogue businessman back to Australia to face justice. Denton essentially offered the resources of the Seven Network to the Australian public to raise enough money for a bounty hunter to kidnap Christopher Skase and bring him to a third country from where he could be extradited.

'It's the best prank I've done,' he says, 'except it was not just a prank . . . It came from genuine anger, but it was a satiric response. I was watching the news [and there was Skase] with no oxygen mask, no wheelchair and I remember thinking, "Fuck, somebody should hire a bounty hunter and bring that prick back", and then I thought, "I can hire a bounty hunter and bring that prick back." The scheme was abandoned on legal advice but only after nearly \$250,000 had been pledged and offers of support had come in from former soldiers, police officers and mercenaries.

Denton is at pains to point out that the Seven Network honoured its commitments to his creative freedom. The problems, as he saw them, lay in the network's ambivalence towards the show and its programming decisions—what time Denton went to air; what programs ran before it. 'They basically left us out to hang,' he says. By the end of the second year, rumours were rife that the program was to be axed. Finally, a senior executive, whom Denton won't name, told him the show was to be scrapped, only to be informed at the 11th hour by another senior executive that the show was to continue. To Denton, it didn't matter. The well had run dry.

'It was unfortunate for Seven but after having done eight years of considerable output [on public and commercial television], I was really burnt out. I think you could fairly say that my sense of humour had gone, though I was still capable of doing jokes—but that's a different thing.

'Also, I was turning into the sort of person I loathed in television—which is the tantrum-throwing star. I don't think I was a lot of fun to

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work with for the last year-and-a-half . . . I was sick of being myself. I was sick of being a public person.'

EVERY CONCEIVABLE TYPE OF AUSTRALIAN, from ditch-diggers to Queen's Counsel, has stopped Denton in the street during the past nine years to tell him how much they have liked his work; to thank him for the pleasure he has brought them.

That has been the positive side of fame. The negative side, of course, has been in the threat that fame has posed to normal relationships. 'Even in your own family, most of the conversations tend to revolve around [yourself], and that's not a healthy or real way to live,' he says.

'That's why I love going out being Jennifer's handbag, for instance. One of the few arguments we've ever had . . . and we continue to disagree on it, I suppose . . . but quite early in our relationship we were walking somewhere in a Victorian country town and some people came up to me and wanted to talk. So I stopped briefly to chat and Jennifer got quite angry. We had a huge argument. She said: "This is our time." I said: "Yes, but I'm not going to be rude to these people. It's not only my business, it's a matter of politeness." It's a difficult balance.'

Denton once threw a quote from American historian Henry Adams at Paul Keating during an interview on *Live and Sweaty*: 'A friend in power is a friend lost.' He could have been talking about himself, except that some of his friends spoken to for this profile indicated that he has always managed to redeem himself by large acts of generosity and contrition.

'I don't want to be one of these really successful guys who doesn't have a friend in the world,' he confesses. 'I don't mind being alone, but I don't want to be lonely.'

At one point in the course of our interviews, Denton calls me and asks how this story is going to end. I tell him I'm not sure. 'I'll give you a line on me,' he offers. 'What about an effect without a cause?' No, that's too self-effacing, he concludes.

Any other suggestions? I ask. 'I ride off into the sunset and keep the girl, but the movie doesn't end.' No, too syrupy. Finally, he tells me he doesn't want his life summed up in an epigram, but then proceeds to offer me one. 'I don't have a punchline to my own life,' he says. 'It's a work in progress.'

The Whites of their Eyes

Postscript

Four months after this profile was published Andrew Denton's father, Kit, died from pneumonia. Denton's relationship with Jennifer Byrne broke up briefly some time later, but the two are now back together. Bleak though these periods were, Denton said in 1999—shortly before stealing the show at the annual Logie Awards—that he had never been happier, nor more at peace. His breakfast show continued to rate well and plans for new work opportunities were in the pipeline. Asked what those work opportunities were, Denton replied, in typically cryptic fashion: 'Just say he still really loves Australia and knows he is going to miss the place!'