WE CAN BE HEROES

By Chris Lilley

Article written by Robert Johnson

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Lilley was born in 1975 and received a public primary and private secondary education. He undertook an Education and Music degree at Macquarie University in Sydney.

In 2006, he won the Logie for ‘Most Outstanding Comedy Series’ and was named the inaugural winner of the Graham Kennedy Award for ‘Most Outstanding New Talent’. We Can Be Heroes was short listed for best comedy episode at the Banff World Television Festival in Canada.

Chris Lilley’s primary interest is the behaviour and concerns of ordinary people drawn from everyday life. His characters reflect the diversity of contemporary Australia and the essence of our national identity. They are created through meticulous research, a keen eye for detail and snippets of conversations overhead from real people. He is also a talented performer who has worked on numerous television shows and commercials, and as an experimental solo pop artist.

At the heart of Lilley’s work is an examination of the unrecognised heroes that are familiar to all of us. This is evident not only in We Can Be Heroes, but also in his earlier work for Tennis Australia, a series of commercials featuring the ‘ordinary’ heroes of the Australian Open. Through satire and comedy he paints endearing portraits that expose our weaknesses as well as our strengths and confront us with difficult questions about who we are and what values we endorse. He will continue this focus with his next project, set in an outer-suburban state secondary college, which includes a deluded drama teacher whose origins date back to Lilley’s university days.
OVERVIEW

Chris Lilley’s award-winning mockumentary, *We Can Be Heroes*, is a broad satirical swipe that exposes the true nature of ordinary Australians and explores the very essence of our modern national identity. Created by and starring Lilley (who plays all five ‘heroes’), the series follows the fortunes of five hopeful Australian of the Year nominees as they await the announcement of the finalists.

Each nominee hails from a different Australian state and each has been nominated for their own unique achievements or attributes. Phil Olivetti is a Queensland policeman who has been recognised for his bravery. Ricky Wong is a Victorian university student who has been nominated for his research into solar energy. South Australian teenager Daniel Sims has been rewarded for the selfless act of donating an eardrum to his deaf twin brother, Nathan. New South Wales schoolgirl Ja’mie King is nominated for her charity work and disabled Western Australian housewife, Pat Mullins, for her pioneering spirit and contribution to the sport of ‘rolling’.

Over the course of the series, we are given insights into the private lives of each individual and learn more about their frailties, fears, ambitions and trials. Each character, in turn, reveals something about modern Australia and the society that we live in. Lilley’s biting, though affectionate, portrait holds up the worst of us for all to see and celebrates us for who we really are. Stripped of pretences and exposed by the cameras, Lilley’s characters can be both warm and vulnerable, or vicious and insecure, but they are always entertaining and, perhaps, more accurate than we would like to admit.

BACKGROUND & SETTING

*We Can Be Heroes* is set in present-day Australia over the course of many months. Students should pay particular attention to the various locations used in the production and their relevance to both character and plot.

Phil and Pat are both suburban creatures located in middle or lower middle class outer suburbs and are representative of the aspirational voters and family types that populate these areas. They exist within familiar family settings,
chatting around dinner tables or breakfast counters and socialising beside barbecues in the backyard. Ja’mie is an inner urban girl and her character reflects the wealth, status and pretentiousness that is often associated with these suburbs. Ja’mie’s school and home typify a world of self-absorbed privilege that is disconnected from the wider world and either indifferent to, or unable to fully comprehend, the suffering of those less fortunate than themselves. Similarly, the twins Daniel and Nathan are emblematic of the rural battlers and they represent traditional concepts of Australian identity. The neglected state of their dilapidated, wind-swept property and town reflects the state of many rural communities and suggests that modern Australia has, in many respects, turned its back upon the bush. By contrast, Ricky is a typically committed university student who is rarely seen in any setting other than university laboratories or drama theatres and this reflects the insular, detached world of university life. The contrast between the clinical atmosphere of the laboratory and the chaotic environment of the stage also mirrors the division within Ricky himself.

Lastly, Parliament House in Canberra can be seen as an appropriate setting to celebrate active citizenship and democracy, while also representing competition, the pinnacle of achievement and success.

**LANGUAGE & STYLE**

*We Can Be Heroes* is a mockumentary that parodies the documentary format. It belongs in the same category as films such as Christopher Guest’s *This is Spinal Tap*, *Waiting for Guffman* and *Best in Show*, or the recent Australian film, *Kenny*. *We Can Be Heroes* also shares many characteristics with other satirical shows such as *Frontline*, *The Office*, * Extras* or *Real News*. It embodies many of the features that typify satire, including:

- the holding up of a ‘mirror’ to society to reveal its flaws, insecurities and blemishes which are often distorted or enlarged to make the point more obvious
- the use of humour, irony, caricature and parody to convey key messages or concerns
• the use of indirect satire where characters unintentionally make their opinions or personalities seem ridiculous or obnoxious through what they think, say or do.

The mockumentary format also has particular features that are distinct to its style or imitative of the documentary style, including:

• a concern for ‘real’ people and their interests, behaviour and actions
• a ‘fly-on-the-wall’ style where people are observed in their ‘natural’ environment and filmed going about their daily lives
• hand-held or shaky camera work to emphasise the ‘reality’ of the situation being recorded and to strip away notions of artifice
• the use of multiple, disparate narratives as the stories of many characters are shown to intertwine around some common goal, objective or activity
• the use of a narrator to guide the viewer through the action and fill in missing information.

*We Can Be Heroes* uses the language of everyday speech, with each character employing the language conventions typical of their class, age, profession and lifestyle. Lilley spent time researching schoolgirls and how they interact for the character of Ja’mie, and the way she speaks mirrors that of a typical teenage girl. Her vocabulary is replete with exclamations of who is ‘hot’ and who is not, and the essential teen-speak irrelevance of ‘like’. Similarly, in her infamous school assembly role play, she mimics the accent and phrasing of popular American teen dramas like *The OC*. Daniel Sims also mimics American popular culture, although his vocabulary centres around that used in hip-hop and beat box culture. By contrast, Pat’s language is very much that of a middle-aged suburban housewife, complete with references to ‘my Terry’ and ‘sweetheart’. Essentially, the language that each character uses reflects both Lilley’s meticulous preparation in forming his characters, and their place within modern Australian society. It also provides us with a useful commentary on the influences that permeate our culture and the erosion of our traditional vernacular.
THE PLOT AT A GLANCE

Episode one introduces us to our five ‘heroes’ as they begin their journey toward the finals. Subsequent episodes reveal more about their individual struggles through everyday life and include interviews with family members, friends and acquaintances. We are shown footage of Phil’s dramatic rescue of nine children in a fly-away jumping castle, and given backstage glimpses of Ricky’s electrifying performance in the ground-breaking musical ‘Indigeridoo’. Ja’mie is shown dominating her school and parading photos of her sponsor children, while Daniel and his brother Nathan gives us a tour of their remote rural property and the main street attractions of Dunt (their home town). Pat’s disability and past struggle with cancer is also explored before we are shown the progress of her dream of ‘Rolling to the Rock’ (literally rolling on her side from Perth to Uluru) and given updates on the obstacles she must overcome if she is to begin.

In the concluding episodes we learn which of the heroes makes it to the finals at Parliament House in Canberra as we watch them mingle with other hopefuls and past winners. The final episode provides us with an opportunity to catch up with each character three months after the winner is announced, when the cameras have moved on, and their minor-celebrity status has dimmed.

- Introduction to the five Australian of the Year nominees for each state
- Phil’s efforts to embark on a new career as a motivational speaker
- Daniel and Nathan preparing for their ground-breaking eardrum transplant operation
- ‘Indigeridoo’ rehearsals and Ricky’s clashes with his parents
- Ja’mie’s sponsorship work and her visit to Villawood Detention Centre to see Sonali
- Pat’s preparation for ‘Rolling to the Rock’
- Sate finalists announced
- Australian of the Year state finals in Canberra
- Australian of the Year announced
- Where are they now?
MAIN CHARACTERS

Lilley’s characters are instantly recognisable for they are ordinary Australians that reflect both the diversity and the concerns of contemporary society. They are our neighbours, colleagues, schoolmates and family members, and each are distinctively Australian in their own particular way.

In his portrayal of these heroes, Lilley captures the unique mannerisms and characteristics of each individual, from Ja’mie’s constant hair flicking and batting of her eyelids, to Ricky’s manic smile and boundless energy. Costume is also an important element in bringing each character to life as their clothing carefully mirrors their distinct personalities.

Phil Olivetti

Some words that could be useful in describing Phil’s personality and behaviour are: boastful, deluded, desperate, insecure, bullying.

Although he is nominated for his bravery, Phil’s insecurity and moral weaknesses are the most telling aspects of his character. His attempts to exploit his brief celebrity status through self-proclaiming merchandise and plans for an autobiography and a miniseries expose his over-inflated sense of self and reveal him as an ambitious and egocentric individual. Lilley also conveys Phil’s selfish, domineering nature through candid shots of him demeaning his wife and children, and the way that he selfishly jeopardises their future in the seemingly-futile pursuit of personal glory.

Ricky Wong

Some words that could be useful in describing Ricky’s personality and behaviour are: effervescent, intelligent, multi-talented, conflicted, optimistic.

Despite his cheerful, effervescent exterior, Ricky is a conflicted individual torn between his twin passions of science and acting. The multiple facets of Ricky’s personality are revealed by his demeanour in the different settings that Lilley places him in, and his behaviour in each. This is particularly evident in the scenes involving Ricky’s family where Lilley shows us his disapproving, overbearing father. In these scenes we see a different Ricky – quiet, deferential and compliant. By contrast, it is on the stage where Ricky truly comes ‘alive’. Ricky’s
flamboyant stage persona also hints at an even deeper conflict regarding his sexuality.

**Daniel Sims**

Some words that could be useful in describing Daniel’s personality and behaviour are: *simple, immature, generous, naïve, blunt.*

Daniel is a slightly awkward, straight-talking individual devoid of the usual niceties that social convention expects. Lilley depicts him as a product of his environment: a bored, simplistic character deprived of opportunities and sources of productive activity or entertainment. Consequently, he is both immature and naïve, confined to roaming his rural property, teasing his handicapped brother and doing ‘mainies’ along the main street of Dunt in his mum’s old Pulsar. However, through scenes in the family home Lilley also takes care to portray Daniel as an endearing character whose clumsy affection for his family is obvious, and whose generosity in donating his eardrum to Nathan is both sincere and appealing.

**Ja’mie King**

Some words that could be useful in describing Ja’mie’s personality and behaviour are: *self-absorbed, petulant, domineering, superficial, hot.*

Ja’mie is the queen of her school – popular, successful, admired and ‘hot’. However, she is also domineering, manipulative, self-serving and exploitative. Her supposedly charitable work collecting money for sponsor children is quickly exposed as being little more than a strategy for advancing her own ambitions (while also providing the slimming benefits that come with doing the 40 Hour Famine every week). As the series progresses, Ja’mie’s superficiality becomes increasingly evident, particularly during her visit to see Sonali in Villawood and her shocking outburst at her mother after most of her sponsor children are drowned in a freak flood. Ja’mie is incapable of seeing beyond her own concerns and perception of herself and Lilley makes a wonderfully subtle point by having her upstaged at the finals by a modest and demure Sonali.
Pat Mullins

Some words that could be useful in describing Pat’s personality and behaviour are: *loving, humble, brave, resourceful, admired.*

Universally admired for her courage and determination in overcoming her disability and cancer, Pat is a warm and loving wife with a generally sunny disposition. She does have her dark moments and is capable of the odd outburst when things get too much, but she normally prefers to dwell on the positives. The devotion shown by her loving husband, Terry, and the dedication of her friends is a clear indication of Pat’s good nature, and Lilley emphasises this by showing us her good-humoured responses to the various obstacles she must overcome. Pat’s sport of ‘rolling’ invites some ridicule, but her passion, perseverance and heart cannot be questioned. While undoubtedly tongue-in-cheek, Lilley’s moving tribute to Pat in the final episode indicates the esteem we are meant to hold her in.

**THEMES & VALUES**

**Australian Identity**

From the opening credits of *We Can Be Heroes* we are shown iconic images of the Australian identity. There are surf lifesavers, cricketers, farmers, home owners, swimmers and young Indigenous Australians supported by the simple theme song, ‘G’day, G’day’. Such people are the traditional reference points for our national spirit and values and stand as a clichéd representation of all we are meant to hold dear. Similarly, Lilley’s characters are archetypes that provide a cross-section of contemporary society, ranging from the aspirational middle class to successful migrants, rural battlers, old money families and salt-of-the-earth suburban strugglers. Through this, Lilley provides us with a snapshot of modern Australia and succinctly summarises our current attitudes, ambitions, challenges and triumphs. However, he also plays upon our insecurities and suggests that traditional concepts of the Australian identity no longer hold true.
Modern Australia is a multicultural nation of diverse interests and beliefs and the iconic images and old stereotypes no longer serve as a simple signifier of who we are. Ricky Wong is a deliberately tokenistic representation of our cultural diversity and of the hard-working migrant. His wonderfully inappropriate audition for a role on *Home and Away* serves as a humorous reminder that while the face of Australia may have changed dramatically, our national stories and the focus of our storytellers often fail to reflect this. It is also significant that indigenous Australia is represented only through an error-ridden and inadvertently offensive Chinese Musical Theatre Group production featuring Kathy Freeman. This potentially reflects wider society’s lack of understanding about indigenous culture and our reluctance to embrace it unless there is a medal hanging around its neck. The suggestion is that we can understand and celebrate sport, but reconciliation or cultural sensitivity remains too difficult. In many respects, Ricky stands for the marginalised (migrants, Indigenous Australians, refugees) and the often neglected role they play in shaping who we are.

Lilley also paints a damning picture of our current concerns and our attitudes to those less fortunate. Phil Olivetti’s desperation for success, and the often-corrup means he is willing to employ to achieve this, hint at an insecurity and a desire that is no longer placated by the old dreams of a quarter acre block and meaningful employment. He suggests that our identity has changed from one of being honest toilers happy to earn success, to one where success is expected to be easy and had at any cost. Ja’mie King also reflects a shift in our national psyche and a hardening of our identity. We like to believe that we are an open, charitable and accepting nation, yet the insinuation is that we can also be self-serving, insular and exclusionary. Ja’mie’s insensitivity when visiting Sonali in Villawood can be seen as a critique of our government’s recent immigration policies, and acts as a stark contrast to our acceptance of previous refugees and asylum seekers.

However, Lilley also suggests that there is still much to admire in the Australian make-up. Pat Mullin’s nomination, in recognition for her ‘pioneering spirit’, is a nod to our ingenuity and determination in the face of insurmountable odds. Her story is a celebration of our greatest attributes and a reminder of the values that
were forged in the harsh realms of the colonies and on the beaches of Gallipoli. In many ways it is appropriate that she is rolling to the heart of our nation (Uluru) as she embodies the characteristics that we like to believe form the heart of our identity – courage, perseverance and compassion. Similarly, Daniel and Nathan Sims also hark back to earlier notions of our identity, while representing current attitudes toward the bush. They represent the lingering remnants of a once dominant force in our national character. They are honest, flawed and genuine, struggling against the elements in remote and unforgiving terrain. They belong to the world captured by Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson, and their remoteness indicates the degree to which our identity and character has moved on from these fading images. We are now an urban, cosmopolitan nation and Lilley highlights the degree to which we have come to neglect the people we once embraced as our national heroes.

Ultimately, though, We Can Be Heroes is a celebration of our strengths and our weaknesses. It implies that our national identity is complex and that old images of sun-bronzed Aussies, vegemite grins and speedos are no longer sufficiently representative. We still socialize around the barbie and value our suburban ‘castles’, but we are also ethnically diverse and increasingly influenced by other cultural forms such as American television shows and popular music. However, perhaps the greatest attribute that Lilley celebrates is our continuing ability to laugh at ourselves, and the fact that we have always taken pride in not taking ourselves too seriously.

KEY EPISODES

Episode Five

This episode is notable for the much anticipated performance of ‘Indigeridoo’, with its misrepresentation of Australian and indigenous history. It is also the episode in which the finalists for each state are nominated and tensions run high as our heroes wait to see if they’ve made it to Canberra.
‘Indigeridoo’ is hailed as a success by the members of the theatre group, yet an indigenous elder sitting in the audience is less than impressed by the factual errors and cultural insensitivity of the well-meaning production. Apart from mistakenly claiming Marcia Hines as an Indigenous Australian, the musical is also replete with stereotypes and clichéd representations of Indigenous culture. While the sight of Chinese-Australians running around in brown lycra bodysuits and tribal markings, and the lyrical content of the songs is hilarious, it also perpetuates patronising misconceptions of indigenous culture and trivialises important beliefs and customs.

It is relevant to the theme of Australian identity because it reveals how little many of us know about this land’s original culture, and our tendency to misappropriate this culture when it suits us. But even more significantly, ‘Indigeridoo’ reminds us of the important place indigenous culture has in our identity, and it provides us with a snapshot of our heritage. Milestones in Australian history are also referenced, from the arrival of Captain Cook, to Mabo and the Sydney Olympics, and this allows us to reflect upon the various events and people that have become part of our national consciousness.

Phil Olivetti’s desperate deception about his position as a finalist, and Ja’mie’s petulant reaction to the death of her sponsor children, also hint at darker elements of our national character that are worthy of discussion.

**Episode 1**

- Opens with a shot of the flag flying high over Parliament House before showing a sea of Australian flags being waved by children or painted on their cheeks
- The necessary qualities for Australian of the Year are outlined
- Introduces the typical Australians that make up our national character
Episode 6

- The opening emphasis is once again on the flag, our national capital and Parliament House, reinforcing notions of identity.
- The focus is on rewarding outstanding contributions and the diversity of talents that Australians possess.
- Sonali’s ‘day release’ from Villawood to attend the state finals could be seen as a comment on our treatment of refugees, questioning the idea that we are free and tolerant.
- The range of people at the ceremony and the highlighting of sporting heroes Kathy Freeman and Lleyton Hewitt give an indication of the people and endeavours we most admire.
- Kathy Freeman’s introduction as a past winner of the award, and David Gulpilil’s announcement as a national finalist could also be seen as an indication of changing social attitudes and an acknowledgement of the increasing relevance of indigenous people to Australia’s national identity.

WRITING ACTIVITIES

The following activities will provide ideas or a draft for something that you can develop for your final writing pieces later. Write your notes in your journal or blog and make sure you head them clearly to show how they relate to the theme or idea you are studying.

- Make a list of the values that you believe typify the Australian character, then make notes about the values that are revealed in these scenes. What similarities and differences can you notice? Which is a more accurate depiction of who we are?
- Look closely at the scenes involving ‘Indigeridoo’, what errors or misunderstandings can you notice about indigenous culture and Australian history? Write a letter from the indigenous elder outlining your objections to the production.
- The Australian flag features prominently in several episodes (as either a focal point or a backdrop). Why is it important to have symbols of national identity and what other symbols can you notice throughout the series? Make a list of them and then explain their significance in shaping who we are.
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. Find someone in your school or family who you believe deserves to be nominated for Australian of the Year. Write a letter to the Australian of the Year board outlining your reasons for nominating them and why they should be considered for the award.

2. Write a review of We Can Be Heroes with an emphasis on what it reveals about our national identity.

3. Write an outline for a new television series that reflects contemporary Australia. What would you call it? Where would it be set and what characters would be involved? Include profiles of the main characters (detailing their gender, age, values, occupation, interests, ethnicity and personality) and a plot summary for the opening episode.

4. With a fellow classmate, role-play an interview with one of the characters from the series. Ask questions that explore notions of national identity and the values that the character believes are important. Record all questions and responses.

5. Research an aspect of indigenous culture or an event in indigenous history and write a scene to be included in ‘Indigeridoo’. Explain the choices you’ve made and whether you believe it is an accurate depiction of the event or culture.

6. Watch another Australian series (e.g. Neighbours, Home and Away, Kath and Kim) and write a critique. How accurately does it represent contemporary Australia and what changes would you consider making?

7. Write a profile for a sixth character for We Can Be Heroes. Where are they from and why have they been nominated? What is their ethnicity, age, gender and background? How do they fit into the Australian identity?

8. Design a web page for one of the characters from We Can Be Heroes, including a personal profile, images and blog entries. Try to capture their philosophy on life, their personality and their particular values.

9. In a group, role-play a meeting between the five characters in the series. How well do you think they’d get along? What conflict or tensions may arise? Which character/s would dominate and which would be compliant?
10 Draft a charter of Australian values. Identify those which you believe to be uniquely Australian, and those which are universal. Which ones reflect a romantic notion of who we are and which are more realistic?

SPRINGBOARD PHRASES

1 We Can Be Heroes exposes both the best and the worst of Australians, but prefers to dwell on the negative.

2 Lilley's use of the mockumentary format adds greater force to the points he is trying to make, as it is more realistic.

3 Ja'mie King and Daniel and Nathan Sims are typical of many young Australians today.

4 Although it is damning and satirical, Lilley's portrait of modern Australia is more affectionate than it is critical.

5 Even with a focus on five different characters, Lilley is still unable to capture the true diversity of our national identity.

6 As viewers, we appreciate Lilley's honesty, but still find it difficult to see our flaws so openly explored on the screen.

7 Although it tries to capture the essence of who we are, We Can Be Heroes suggests that there is no such thing as a typical Australian.

8 Ricky Wong is symbolic of the migrant experience and represents the contributions that they have made to our way of life and identity.

9 We Can Be Heroes offers the viewer an interesting critique of our national values and suggests that we don't always live up to our expectations.

10 If We Can Be Heroes proves anything, it is that the old iconic images of Australia (lifesavers, farmers, sports people) are no longer accurate or even relevant.

TEXT

ABOUT THE WRITER

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