

Hollywood or bust

FOR MANY AUSSIE ACTORS, THE ONLY WAY TO CRACK AMERICA'S PRIME TIME IS BY PACKING THEIR BAGS AND RISKING IT ALL ON A TV PILOT

STORY ANNA WARWICK

HOLLYWOOD



(from left) Tammin Sursok and Isabel Lucas are enjoying success in the US; Stephanie McIntosh is hoping to follow their lead.



Other actors taking a punt in LA include (clockwise from left) Trilby Glover, Daniel MacPherson and Dichen Lachman.

Julian McMahon, Simon Baker, Rachel Griffiths, Toni Collette, Ryan Kwanten, Melissa George, Rose Byrne, Jesse Spencer – it seems there's an Aussie face (with an American accent) on nearly every big-budget US TV show. One day they're the boy or girl next door *Down Under*, then boom, they're up for a Golden Globe. For a country our size, we're punching well above our weight in the star wattage stakes.

At a glance, this upgrade to prime time looks easy enough. But is it really just a hop, skip and a jump from Summer Bay to LA?

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2010. JONES BAR, WEST HOLLYWOOD
Rupert Reid (*Blue Heelers*, *The Matrix Trilogy*) enters a small room full of young Australian actors. Some are here to celebrate the birthday of rising director Ben Matthews, some are here just to hang with their mates. Everyone is drinking water; they must all be in peak performance mode, which means no booze.

Adelaide's Damon Herriman (*House of Wax*, *Love My Way*), whose first TV series in the US, *Justified*, premiered on FX in March, is chatting with Perth girl Trilby Glover (*Crash*, *The Starter Wife*). The bevy of beautiful people

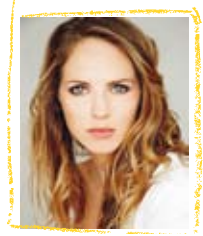
includes Stephanie McIntosh and Dichen Lachman (*Neighbours*), Ella Scott Lynch (*All Saints*) and Libby Richmond (*Home and Away*).

This talented bunch is a mere sliver of the Aussie contingent in LA for pilot season, which runs every year from January to March. In 2010, each network is making about 30 pilot episodes – the first in a new TV series producers hope gets the green light. Only a few of them will go into production but, bearing in mind that only a fraction of that many new shows will be made on our shores this year, it's enough to entice hopefuls to fly out to audition. >

The process is nerve-racking, even for seasoned performers. Daniel MacPherson (*City Homicide*), who was called back to audition for two pilot leads, tweeted in February: "Nine people in a room, sitting and staring at you, while whispering... not for the faint of heart."

Reid, 35, became a permanent US resident two years ago, after travelling back and forth from Australia for several years. It was five years before he landed his first pilot, but the series wasn't picked up. "It's like hunting season," he says. "But who's the hunter and who's the hunted? We're out there auditioning for three or four projects each week, after the moviestars have taken their pick of the plum roles. Will we land one or will one land us?"

Reid's manager, Charles Skouris, joins him. Representing an Australian actor is a potential goldmine. "I'm so lucky to have this strapping,



"I'm scrimping by on my savings. I've needed about \$6000 for these three months, plus flights. It's lucky pilot season is only once a year"

Alix Bidstrup

talented Aussie to work with" says Skouris. "I have great empathy for those who travel across the world to pursue their dreams. I grew up in LA, and the actors here have a sense of entitlement. The Aussies come with energy and enthusiasm, and they stand out."

A buzz fills the room. Someone's had a call from Sullivan Stapleton (*Sea Patrol, Underbelly*), who's landed a pilot. Stapleton is celebrating with more expats at another venue, so some of the crowd are going to join them. The unspoken question in the room is, who'll be next?

FRIDAY, WARNER BROTHERS STUDIOS

Alix Bidstrup (*All Saints*), 26, is early. For this audition, she's been asked to 'dress sexy'. The character reads as aggressive and punky, so she's wearing red Doc Martin boots, a short black skirt and black tank top. This is her first pilot season. "My Australian agent came to LA last September and took about 50 meetings to find me the best opportunities," she says. "I followed him and met with 16 agents and managers in two weeks."

Bidstrup is here on a three-month visa that allows her to audition, but not work. She's found share accommodation in the Hollywood foothills and leased a car. "I need stability to work at my best, so I can't crash on floors," she says. "I'm scrimping by on my savings. I've needed about \$6000 for these three months, plus flights. It's lucky pilot season is only once a year."

As she walks into the studio, Bidstrup is excited: "It's so much fun to work with great material, whether it's an audition or a paid performance." She takes a seat in the waiting room with dozens of other gorgeous hopefuls.

Forty minutes go by, as one girl after another enters the audition room, and Bidstrup tries to keep her own morale high: "My lines are great, I know this character and my American accent is having a good day." At last, they call her name. In the room, she breathes a sigh of relief when she realises there's no camera and just one person to read to. This is a pre-audition read, a safety net for casting agents in case the actor they're seeing has been over-hyped.

Bidstrup delivers the scenes and waits to be dismissed, but they work through them a few more times. "This only happens about 20 per cent of the time," she says. "More often

than not, it's walk in, do the scene and leave."

She's feeling upbeat. Then, without warning, the casting guy bluntly shows her the door, leaving her completely unsure of how she's done. But when news arrives a few days later, it's positive - they want her to do a screen test. (This is, unfortunately, as far as she gets.)

FRIDAY EVENING, RUPERT REID'S APARTMENT, HOLLYWOOD

Reid is rehearsing audition scenes for the Fox pilot *Body of Evidence* with actor Roxanne Wilson (*Stingers, Water Rats*). They're talking in American accents, even when making tea.

Wilson hit the LA circuit several years ago with her husband, Grant Bowler (*All Saints, Outrageous Fortune*). Then they had two children and Bowler returned alone, landing himself *Ugly Betty* two years ago and lately shooting episodes for *True Blood*. This year, with kids in tow, Wilson is in LA for pilot season.

"There's no clear path from waiting tables to getting in a limo," Wilson muses. "Some do it overnight, some take years. On one level it's a bonanza, and on the other it's a lottery. If you get a start in US TV, you're guaranteed [work] for the rest of your life. In Australia, a lot of good actors don't work for a year or two."

Tonight, the two actors are 'self-testing'. They drive to a converted warehouse in Hollywood, where they're welcomed by an independent casting agent, who ushers them into a studio.

They pay her \$45 to film the screen tests, upload them to the internet and email the links to Faith Martin Casting in Sydney.

THURSDAY AFTERNOON, FAITH MARTIN CASTING, FOX STUDIOS, SYDNEY

Faith Martin is in her office, uploading *Body of Evidence* screen tests to Fox's intranet. Some were filmed in the studio downstairs, the rest are self-tests from actors across Australia and LA.

"Producers want the best, no matter where it comes from," she explains. Martin's been in the business for more than 20 years, pushing local names, discovering stars and finding actors dream roles. For 2010, she's cast several pilots, including the green-lighted Fox productions *Masterwork*, landing Matt Passmore (*Underbelly*) his first lead, and *Persons Unknown*, with a lead for Daisy Betts (*Out of the Blue*).

To actors around the nation, Martin is a fairy godmother waving a wand over their careers, but she insists there's no magic to it. "I'm someone who shows up and does my job."

Just then, breaking news hits the office; Fox has announced the series *Past Life* has been cancelled. This means lead actor Nick Bishop (*Home and Away*) is available. Immediately, Martin sets the wheels in motion for Bishop, 36, to test for *Body of Evidence*. (This flash of inspiration proves to be pure genius. Bishop has since landed the role and Fox has given the series the green light.)

"It's the combination of the actor and the character - what the actor brings to the material," Martin says of the process. "I watch all the TV shows, go to the theatre and watch local and international films. I need to know what's going on - who can give the project legs."

In Australia, there are about 20 casting directors who proactively seek new talent. In the US, there's the same number of major casting directors, each with a vast empire of underlings running hundreds of classes and workshops. American actors do as many courses as possible just to get in front of casting directors.

Still, Martin is modest. "No actor needs us, they just need to believe in themselves," she says. "Timing is everything. Some get close, then it doesn't happen, but six months later, something better comes along. It's about trusting the process. When the time is right, it will be right."

Indeed, Martin feels that for many of our hopefuls, that time is now. "There's a feeling all eyes are on the actors here," she says. "As one US producer recently said to me, 'All the best actors in the world currently are Australian.'"

Meanwhile, at home, we're glued to our TVs, waiting to see which *Neighbour* will pop up next to blow the minds of hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide. Break a leg. **SM**