

## GREEN GUIDE REALITY

# Stage set for a break from the humdrum

But a free run at a dream job can come with its own trials, discovers Michael Dwyer.

**T**HE universal allure of greener grass is a dominant draw of reality TV. It's the luxury of sending someone else over the fence to test the turf that glues us to the most contrived real-life scenario a television camera can frame. *Give Me a Break* is the latest series to turn the pipedreams of regular folk into more-or-less brutal reality for the armchair sadomasochist.

In each half-hour episode, one professionally disgruntled Western Australian is given the chance to prove their mettle in the career they've long coveted. The pocket dramas range from hilarious to harrowing. *Barman to Real Estate Whiz* is as funny as a Christopher Guest mockumentary. *Roller Driver to Animal Carer* unsettles like a performance anxiety nightmare.

The first step for the experiment was nailing a set of mentors in workplaces that tend to attract high public interest, says series producer Celia Tait.

"Catering, performing arts, real estate and animal welfare are all areas where there is a real curiosity for many people. We went in asking OK, what is the hard graft and what are the

benefits here?"

The second step was ensuring genuine enthusiasm and commitment from all concerned. "We've all done work experience where we end up making coffee and stacking the photocopier," she says. "Finding real, meaningful experience over a short training period is much more difficult."

You bet. Episode one is the cooking show from hell as 28-year-old Mallika takes leave from her paper-shuffling gig to play chef in a massive convention centre kitchen that prepares up to 5000 quality meals a day.

As in real life, wild cards abound. Mallika has been wheelchair-bound since childhood, for instance. In episode two, Mount Magnet teenager Renae is granted her heart's desire to study acting, but has to join the WA Performing Arts Academy just two weeks before the end-of-term public performance of Louis Nowra's *Radiance*.

Mercifully though, these are not transparent set-ups of the *Tommy Lee Goes to College* variety. Celia Tait stresses the legitimate social value of the series over and above the engineered melodrama of much

reality television. "We very much hoped they would all be positive experiences," she says.

"Not that everyone would necessarily decide, 'Hey, this job is definitely for me', but that there would be a realisation of

whether they were a good fit in that profession.

"So we were hoping they would all be successful, however you like to define that concept."

What makes *Give Me a Break* so watchable is not what's won and lost, but who's playing the game. On this evidence, the main deciding factor in finding a compatible occupation is nothing more or less than the personality of the applicant.

This natural selection criterion is thrown into vivid relief by the often contrasting characters of mentor and "breaker". In the final episode, the simmering friction between larrikin truck driver Liz and buttoned-down RSPCA inspector Myra is a parable unto itself.

The classic, though, is episode three, in which affable 28-year-old barman Dave finds rides shotgun with real-estate guru Terry, a fair dinkum David Brent (*The Office*) character keen to pass on the self-help theories in his unpublished book, *Get off Your Arse and Stop Whingeing*. On the phone last week, Dave was still reeling from the intensity of the experience.

"It wasn't what I expected," he says. "It was pretty full on. It was worth it for me emotionally,

for my self-esteem, but it was a bit of a stress on me and my girlfriend at the time, and I pretty much decided (selling real estate) wasn't for me."

This is doubtless a crushing blow to Terry, who kicks Dave's arse in the show like the son he never had.

"Through the whole process he kept telling me the sacrifices I'd have to make to get into real estate," Dave says.

"He actually said to me I'd have to disassociate from my friends and make new ones.

"There's not many real-estate agents that I know of that aren't divorced. To be quite honest, my friends and my girlfriend are worth more than all the money in the world to me."

Dave has since decided to do a graphic design course next year, although the brief intrusion of TV cameras into his otherwise real life has awakened another dream. "The being on camera side of things I absolutely loved," he says, "because I'm a bit of a showman myself."

Celia Tait hopes to make a second series of *Give Me a Break* as soon as possible. Potential applicants are advised to exercise extreme caution in what they wish for.

*Give Me A Break* begins on Wednesday, March 29, at 7.30pm in the *Inside Australia* documentary timeslot on SBS.



Them's the breaks: Renae Simpson — in the series' second episode, Schoolgirl to Actor — at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. Right, barman Dave Feighan, 28, goes into real estate in episode three.