



04 AUG, 2022

Neighbours' brightest stars

West Australian, Perth

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BILL SHORTEN



Love is in the air! I have finally gotten around to watching the Neighbours finale and the feel-good vibes from the final episodes were infectious.

I confess I have not watched Neighbours in decades, but it was an honest to goodness, bona fide walk down the memory lane of Australian culture.

In Australia, almost a million people tuned in last week to watch the final double episode.

In the UK, where the obsession with the show has been in some ways much fiercer than here, 2.5 million Brits watched the finale.

After 37 years, the final episodes were a masterclass in how to touch the hearts of diehard fans, as well as those people who were tuning in to catch a bit of the cultural icon's final moments.

The final show provided cheesy nostalgia across the board. If you hadn't tuned in for 20-odd years like myself, you could seamlessly slot back into where the storyline was at by the cast of characters 40 and over.

Harold Bishop (played by the wonderful Australian actor Ian Smith), stalwarts Karl and Susan Kennedy (Jackie Woodburne and Alan Fletcher), the evil Paul Robinson (Stefan Dennis), and the legendary Toadie Rebecchi (Ryan Moloney) were still front and centre.

The Ramsay Street finale was buzzing from the short and

strangely silent cameo from the show's former star Kylie Minogue (as well as Jason Donovan), who played the seminal 1980s TV couple Scott and Charlene.

The cavalcade of familiar faces also included Paul Keane,

who played Des, Annie Jones (Jane), and Peter O'Brien, returning as Shane.

Neighbours has thrown up a lot of the ultimate cultural cringe in its almost four decades on the small screen and the finale had it all — a wedding, love connections and broken hearts. That's all part of the guilty pleasure of Neighbours though, isn't it? The often bizarre storylines make it a series to remember.

But it has also been a TV trailblazer in Australia, celebrating diversity in storylines about LGBTIQ+ people, immigrants and people with disability.

There has been a lot of chatter online about Hollywood star Guy Pearce's return to the show as Mike Young, who came

back for the final three episodes to rekindle his romance with Jane. Mike brought his daughter, Sam, back to Ramsay Street with him, played by wonderful actor Henrietta Graham, who is one of Australia's up-and-coming actors with a disability.

Henrietta is one of the students enrolled at RMIT's film school for Victorians with disability and, while fans may have been excited about the annoyingly fit-looking Pearce's return, I thought Henrietta was a real star.

In her breakout role, Henrietta got to land the quintessential statement every neighbours fan has uttered:

"It's not a street. It's a court." Brilliant.

Henrietta is an NDIS

participant and central to her plan is pursuing her acting career.

Neighbours was her first job, which her mum, Natalie, said in an interview excitingly came with filling out a superannuation form and getting a bank account. Her parents are right behind her career. Henrietta's NDIS package has given her the ability to pursue a career for herself though.

Henrietta wasn't the only NDIS participant on the show. East Brighton man Oli Stratford appeared in three episodes this year, with the hopes he could help pave the way for future actors with disability.

To Oli, it would be amazing if a young person with disability saw him on the telly and think "I want to do that, too."

Representation matters. Henrietta and Oli's roles should be a signal to the entertainment industry that people with disability can act and they're damn good at it!

That's the heart of the NDIS — choice and control for participants, whether they want to be on the stage or screen or start their own microbusiness at home.

As Minister for the NDIS and just as a proud Aussie, I want to see all young Australians with disability thrive. I'd like to thank Henrietta for providing me with my feel-good TV moment of the year.

As for the rest of the cast and crew, thanks for the memories.

Bill Shorten is the Minister for the NDIS, Minister for



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**Government Services and Federal
Member for Maribyrnong.**

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