

It's the must-watch show for kids, parents and anyone wanting a moment of heartwarming goodness. Aimee Knight talks to the people behind *Bluey* to discover why the little blue heeler is taking the world by storm.

by **Aimee Knight** Small Screens Editor

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he other day a friend said, 'I'm I have no children. But when sad or hungover, I watch Bluey,'" laughs Melanie "Chilli" Zanetti, an actor and voiceover artist from Brisbane. "I thought that was very

funny. It's obviously tapping into something."

If you haven't yet encountered *Bluey*, chances are you don't have much contact with the kindergarten set – though it seems that's no longer an excuse. After all, the eponymous pup stars in the most-watched show in ABC iview history.

Since debuting in 2018, *Bluey*'s first season has accrued more than 200 million program plays on the platform. The number-one kids show on Australian broadcast TV resonates not just with children but with parents, grandparents and even kid-free adults who









have no ostensible reason to watch a preschool cartoon about an anthropomorphic dog family. But, as Zanetti notes, it's just "so funny and charming and true to life".

Bluey centres on the adventures of its titular blue heeler - a rambunctious and loveable little girl, age six. She has a sensitive younger sister called Bingo, age four, and two enviable parents in Bandit (voiced by Custard frontman Dave McCormack) and Chilli (Zanetti). Created by animator and short film director Joe Brumm, Bluey illustrates the power of creative play, and was inspired by the hijinks of his own two daughters.

"Most episodes are based on different games," says Brumm, "and most of those games are stuff that I would play with the kids." Bluey's amusements range from the stockstandard restaurant and doctor games, through to fanciful roleplays about fairies, robots, fruit bats and beyond. When some

social quarrel percolates, the characters must resolve their differences, usually through unstructured play.

"The little dramas they have, and the parenting dramas, are all drawn from our lives," says Brumm, over the phone from Brisbane's Ludo Studio. His laidback intonation has that distinctly Queensland lilt. Actually, it sounds a lot like Bandit's.

An archaeologist who works from home (yes, it's a thing), Bandit has been celebrated as a present, patient and engaged father. He joins in with the kids' imaginative musings while seeing to his list of chores throughout their pastel-toned Queenslander home.

Bandit may be the antithesis to TV's "dumb dad" stereotype - think: Fred Flintstone, Homer Simpson, Al Bundy – but his domestic contribution is framed as wholly unremarkable. Chilli and Bandit aren't "super parents", says Brumm. They're doing their best, and they're honest about the slog.

As the show's head writer, Brumm routinely runs scripts by his wife Suzy, a storyboard artist on the show. "[Suzy] felt pretty fresh off the bench to motherhood," he says. "So she's always keen to make sure that Chilli is learning on the job.

"To tell you a secret," he says, "I write through Chilli a lot of the time. She's like Bandit in that she loves those kids, but there's also those little longings for how it was before." Compared to Bandit's extroversion, Chilli is quiet. One poignant episode, 'The Beach', sees Chilli take a solo walk to get some headspace. It's an empathetic nod to the unspoken notion that life was different before the kids arrived.

These truths imbue *Bluey* with a relatability, balance and sincerity that's rare in kids TV. The candid depiction of family life has earned the show an earnest following from folks who dig its authenticity. Exhibit A: the recap podcast Gotta Be Done, hosted by two Melbourne mums.

So it's understandable that fans felt let down when, last November, an official character description suggested Chilli's return to work had caused her to "fall short" of other mothers. Author Jamila Rizvi and many other viewers expressed disappointment at the implicit mum-shaming. "Chilli is my cartoon mother pin-up," Rizvi tweeted. "I find myself asking 'What would Chilli do?' most days. What a horrible write-up of a mum doing a damn fine job."

Typically when artists and brands are called out on Twitter, they either offer a pro forma apology or, worse, dig deeper. Testament to the thoughtful team behind Bluey, executive producer Daley Pearson swiftly replied with a revision that emphasised Chilli's adaptability and her wry sense of humour - a trait that also appeals to her owner, so to speak.

"This is my first mum role and my first dog role," says Zanetti, calling from her second home in LA. "She's so warm and intelligent. She's like, mum goals," Zanetti laughs, before adding, "and she's a great partner to Bandit."

For cartoon canines, Chilli and Bandit have undeniable chemistry. They work together as an effective, affectionate parental unit. (Season two leans further into their romantic connection.) So it may surprise fans to learn that Zanetti and McCormack have never met. "We all record separately," she says. "We've emailed and [McCormack]'s lovely, but...we're in different countries right now."

It begs the question: how do they get such natural performances? Particularly from the young women who play Bluey and Bingo (their names are intentionally withheld from the credits, though press materials note that all the pups are voiced by "local children, and children of the production crew").

"I've seen where they record and there are lots of things that make noises and are playful," says Zanetti, though she herself just steps into a plain ol' booth. "What makes it natural is that I act it all out, especially when I'm doing something that has force - lifting someone up or running around. The audio doesn't hit

unless you're doing it and being there."

That sense of freedom and frivolity informs Brumm's work, too.

Tuning out all the busy work of production, he meditates for an hour every morning, often generating ideas. He calls meditation his "secret weapon". Once he's keen on an initial concept, Brumm takes a pen and pad somewhere comfy and just...plays.

For instance: what if one of the puppies wore a cone of shame?

"You start with that, then go, 'I wonder what it looks like if I invert it?" says Brumm. "You draw a little sketch of her getting stuck in a doorway."

Sometimes he sketches, sometimes he writes, "There's not really any one way," he explains. "There's no structure - it's free play. I wouldn't say I'm in control of it." Doesn't that sound like Bluey and Bingo's own raptures? "I'm learning that's where the heart and joy of these scripts come from," Brumm says. "This non-rigid, playful period."

Whimsical as they may be, Bluey's plots don't feel forced or affected – certainly not in contrast to other preschool series. "I don't watch a great deal of kids TV, honestly because I can't stand most of it," Brumm laughs,

> wearily. He says the stories are too contrived, and any adult who's suffered through an episode of Peppa Pig will agree.

He recounts a standard kids' show scenario: a child breaks something belonging to a parent. Overcome with guilt, the kid spends the whole episode making an endearing but sub-par replacement.

"It doesn't happen," says Brumm, speaking from experience. "They break your thing and they don't care. That's the Bluey episode.

"It's funnier because it's more relatable, it's idiosyncratic. You don't often see it, but it lands a lot harder."

Zanetti agrees. "It feels like paradoxical intention, but the more specific and vulnerable you

can get with the truth, the more relatable it becomes. That's Bluey in a nutshell." Brumm says, "One of

the comments we get all the time is, They've opened a window into our living room. They've got a camera in our living room. And those to me are some of the best compliments, because you feel like everyone's sharing this. It isn't just me who feels this way; that's not just my kid who does that. It's really nice to have that relatability."

Ludo Studio, its production partner Screen Queensland, and the ABC receive so, so much Bluey fan mail. Viewers write to the young pup herself, sending cards and letters suggesting games she could play. Parents send anecdotes that might inspire the animators.

Online, parents reveal that Chilli and Bandit have taught them to be more patient and present with their kids (not to mention how the "tactical wee" has changed their lives).

Zanetti was contacted by someone whose son is on the autism spectrum. Nothing holds his attention like Bluev does. It's teaching him how to play with other kids. "That made me cry," says Zanetti. "We're part of something that's actually having a positive effect on the world."

"I read a comment once where this guy said his dad watches it," recalls Brumm. "He's older now and Chilli reminds him of his late wife. The daughters remind him of his kids when they were young. I thought, You've created a show that's showing childhood in a very relatable way. Even when your kids are grown up, you'll still remember that era.

"Bandit and Chilli, they're always griping about the games, right?" he says. "It's so easy to wish it away because you're always tired and it's such hard work.

"It's not until those phases end that you start to really miss them."

Brumm's two daughters are no longer four and six. They've grown out of the developmental phase shaped by creative play. "It does feel like I'm drifting away from that little snapshot *Bluey* takes place in, that timeless zone." His memory is pretty good, though, and he wrote lots while the girls were young. Lucky, because their onscreen counterparts are here for the long haul.

In the UK and North America, Bluey has started screening on Disney Junior. In January this year, it landed on Disney+ in most other territories, besides China, where it streams on Youku, though dubbed in Mandarin. (That's the only version that doesn't feature the original Australian voice work, which the producers fought to retain on all the other releases.)

Some merchandise is already available in Australia, and Moose Toys is set to release its first line of Bluev play sets, figurines, plush toys and accessories in the USA later this year.

And back at home, Bluey's long-awaited second season has just started on ABC Kids and iview. The heelers will soon make their live debut in a touring theatre show, which crosses the country from May 2020 to January 2021.

How has Bluey's success changed Brumm's relationships with his family and friends? "Look, I haven't changed much in the last few years," he says, "but I'm definitely a lot busier.

"My life is moving into a different phase than Bandit and Chilli's, but we still play some of those games from time to time. It's nice."



Bluey

illustrates

the power

of creative