



Rake – ABC Television 2010

By Richard Beasley



Peter Duncan discusses a scene on set with Hugo Weaving. Photo: courtesy of ABCTV.

A rake, as all would know, is a garden implement capable of a number of uses. Deriving from the Restoration period, the term can also mean a 'dissipated or immoral man of fashion', a 'promiscuous fellow dedicated to riotous living', or simply an all out bastard who ends up 'insane or in debtors prison'.

Later this year, *Rake* is also the title of an eight part television series likely to be of interest to all, and particularly to the legal profession and members of the bar.

Whatever relevance the title may have to the subject of the series, that interest will be sparked for lawyers as the 'rake' in question, and star of the show, is Cleaver Greene – philanderer, serial adulterer, addicted gambler and member of the New South Wales Bar.

Rake stars Richard Roxburgh (*Blue Murder*, *Moulin Rouge*, *Mission Impossible 2*) in the lead role of barrister Cleaver Greene, and four of the eight episodes are written by Peter Duncan (*Children of the Revolution*, *A Little Bit of Soul*, *Unfinished Sky*).

Scrutinising the law on the small screen is not new to Duncan. A former

paralegal at Allen's prior to running away to film school, he has previously examined the legal world on television, writing the screenplay and directing the telemovie *Hell has Harbour Views*. Described by the ABC as a story about 'a man who finds his conscience in a law firm', that same organisation cunningly broadcast this telemovie up against the 2005 Men's Australian Open Tennis final. This not only meant that some potential viewers missed it, but also led to some confusing reviews¹.

With *Rake*, Peter Duncan is hoping for timeslots not clashing with the 2010 Football World Cup, but from what he has told *Bar News* about the nature of the main character, and the subject matter of his cases, *Rake* might not be scheduled during family viewing time.

When interviewed for *Bar News*, Duncan explained that lead character Cleaver Greene, while a very clever criminal barrister, is someone who has made a complete mess of his personal life. Cleaver may have a 'great love of life and love', but it's his consummated desire for his best friend's wife – together with an addiction to gambling and generally 'high' living – that causes

him to have even more problems than his criminal clients.

Cleaver Greene may not be the most romantic of names, but he is, Duncan told me, a lover of people – the downtrodden, the accused, and the forgotten. He adores his 15-year-old son from his first marriage. And he's still in love with every woman he's ever been involved with – his first wife, his best friend's wife, old girlfriends, etc. He still loves his best friend, although understandably their relationship in the series is somewhat strained. Duncan hopes that *Rake* not only explores the sometimes strange world of a criminal barrister and the Justice system, but also the 'bizarre complexities of modern life'.

Well known barrister and author Charles Waterstreet is the 'script consultant' for *Rake* – understandably provoking some curiosity as to whether the inspiration for the main character may have come from a real life member of the bar. Viewers however may well be disappointed if they are expecting to recognise any particular barrister in *Rake*. 'Charles has obviously had an influence on the series as our script consultant,' Duncan explained, 'but those influences are really to do with plot tweaks and practical matters. Cleaver Greene is a work of fiction.'

I once heard Waterstreet give a talk on his wonderful memoir *Precious Bodily Fluids*, during the course of which he took a call on his mobile phone, and then announced to the audience that yet another 'very, very, very innocent client' had just been acquitted by a jury. The viewing public will have to watch *Rake* and make up its own mind as to whether Cleaver Greene is a 'very, very, very fictitious character'.

I also asked Duncan what we could expect from the story lines for *Rake*.

‘Clever’s cases, like him, are very colourful,’ he said. ‘He has no doubt as to the guilt of each of his clients. It’s really about how he plays the game, how he tests the system – often brilliantly – to get his clients acquitted that is the heart of the series. That, together with the complete catastrophe he makes of his personal life. He uses his wit and wisdom to full effect in his professional capacity, but often only his wit with his personal life.’

This it seems is where at least part of the title *Rake* came from. ‘I actually do mean it as an analogy with the garden tool as much as a reference to a type of man,’ Duncan said. ‘The series is about how well Cleaver as a barrister is able to rake through the detritus and problems of his clients’ lives – people who are otherwise forgotten or abandoned – while at the same time creating a total mess of his own life.’

What specifically though are the kinds of cases Cleaver is briefed in?

‘Problems with high-ranking members of the New South Wales government. Bestiality. Cannibalism. Bigamy. Inciting racial hatred. ...,’ Duncan told me.

At first I assumed that this was just the one episode, but Duncan later corrected my misapprehension, and told me that these topics account for five of the eight episodes – two of which are directed by Duncan (who is also a co-



Richard Roxburgh

producer of the series with Roxburgh, and Ian Collie of Essential Media (*DIY Law, Hell Has Harbour Views*), and six by other directors including Rachel Ward (*Beautiful Kate*) and Jessica Hobbs (*Curtin, Love my Way*).

If there is a real inspiration to *Rake* it’s not any particular New South Wales barrister. It’s the 1990’s Granada television series *Cracker*. ‘Nobody thought *Cracker* would work. The main character is on one view fairly repulsive. He’s an alcoholic, chain-smoking, foul-mouthed adulterer. Not the sort of character they thought people would want to watch a series about. And nobody thought that people would

want to watch a show starring Robbie Coltrane. But Jimmy McGovern’s scripts, Coltrane and ‘Fitz’ were all brilliant – he’s a brilliant criminologist. It was a groundbreaking series, and if *Rake* has an inspiration, it’s *Cracker*.’

Anyone who has seen Peter Duncan’s previous films knows that he’s a great talent, capable of handling serious subject matter with deft comic touches. The scripts are co-written by Andrew Knight (*Seachange, After the Deluge*), and it has a terrific cast. Apart from Roxburgh in the lead role, Hugo Weaving plays an economist who moonlights as a cannibal in episode one, Noah Taylor (*Shine, Almost Famous*) is a street crim, Lisa McCune swaps her *Sea Patrol* gear to jury tamper in another episode, and Geoff Morrell (*Grass Roots, Curtin*) is the constantly stressed NSW attorney general. *Bar News* Editor Andrew Bell SC is even expected to play the small role of a prominent prosecutor’s junior (contingent upon his fee fitting within ABC budgetary constraints).

Rake is certain to be compelling viewing, not to mention a hoot.

Endnote

1. ‘The opening scene was weak, but the third set was magnificent’, *The Age*, 31/1/05.