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Wil Anderson, host of ABC TV's hit *The Gruen Transfer*, talks about working with Andrew Denton and where the show might go next

WORDS ELIZABETH GRAHAM
PHOTOGRAPHY RUSTY WHITE

For Wil Anderson, the biggest challenge in hosting *The Gruen Transfer*, ABC1's hit series about advertising was something that seems like a comedian's dream come true: working with Andrew Denton, the show's co-creator and producer.

"I grew up watching Andrew on TV," says Anderson, 35. "I learnt a million things from Andrew, but the hardest thing about the whole process of *The Gruen Transfer* was to look at someone who you think is amazing, who other people would never question, and have the courage to say, 'No, I think you're wrong.'"

Anderson says Denton's ABC comedy show in the 90s, *The Money Or The Gun*, as well as another ABC program, *The Big Gig*, inspired his love of comedy and his career in it, first as a stand-up comic and then also as a radio and television host.

He admits that, while their collaboration on *The Gruen Transfer* was sometimes stormy, the show was better for it. "Denton's a pig-headed person like I am, so we bumped heads together lots. But that's OK. I mean, it's a creative process. The worst thing would



With Todd Sampson (left) and Russel Howcroft (right), regular panelists on *The Gruen Transfer*.

have been if I'd *not* disagreed with him."

Anderson's tall, lanky body is nervously fidgeting, perhaps because our photographer is snapping pictures while we talk. We're sitting on a rooftop terrace and behind Anderson is the southern, unglamorous end of the Sydney CBD. It's a far cry from his childhood home on a dairy farm in Denison in rural Victoria, which turned him into a lifelong city slicker and "vegetarian" who eats fish and happily admits to wearing a leather jacket.

Looking out over the cityscape, Anderson jokes that he's spent most of his career within a few blocks of this building. Just down the road is ABC headquarters where he worked for seven years straight from 1999 until 2006, including four years of co-hosting triple j's breakfast program, and his six-year hosting stint on the satirical TV show *The Glass House*.

The latest chapter in Anderson's affiliation with Aunty has been a resounding hit with the public. By the end of *The Gruen Transfer's* first season, almost 1.5 million people were

tuning in each Wednesday evening to see Anderson and a panel of advertising experts dissect and demystify the ads that surround us every day. There are hopes the audience for the new 2009 season will be higher still.

"We wanted people who were willing to give away some of the magician's secrets," Anderson says of the show's panel, some of whom he admits have received complaints

from their advertising clients because of what they've said. "These are smart people and it's still dangerous for them."

One of the show's regular panelists, Todd Sampson, the CEO of ad agency Leo Burnett, says he has no qualms about returning for this year's season. "Generally, it's been really well received," he says. "Most people in the industry think it has done good; it's taken away myths,

highlighted creativity."

Sampson also has high praise for his on-air host. "I'm a huge Wil fan and that's mainly because he's like a cat. If a cat could speak it'd be Wil," Sampson roars with laughter. "He's sharp and funny and completely unpredictable. He never made you feel comfortable — you didn't know whether he was going to come at you. I work in the business of creative people and he is the quickest mind I ever worked with."

When I repeat this remark to Anderson, he smiles faintly but is quick to point out how much painful preparation he does. "The show is not fun to do," he says. "I mean, it's not fun in the way going to the beach is fun, or performing a night of stand-up comedy is fun."

"I would not only have to become an expert in the advertising industry itself, I would also have to become an expert in whatever area we were talking about. Because, if you're sitting on a panel with four people whose job it is to bend the truth for a living, then you've got to have a bullshit detector."

"At the end of each show it would be a



relief that [I] got away with it. So I look back on it fondly, but the process itself is draining.”

In person, Anderson is much more subdued than I expected, given his high-octane public performances and Sampson’s feline comparisons. He’s also disarmingly honest — about Denton and the show, but also in regard to his own personal struggles.

“This has been the shittiest year of my life, without a doubt, but it’s been a good year for perspective,” he says of 2008. Last year, Anderson’s long-term relationship with partner Amy Williamson ended and a close friend died. Anderson has talked about these issues, and the counselling he got as a result, in his most recent stand-up show, which toured Australia and played in London. Perhaps doing that was a cathartic experience for him?

Anderson laughs loudly, his first during the interview. “No, it’s almost the opposite. It’s like groundhog day!” he cries. “It was quite horrible, reliving that same shitty part of your life every weekend. But it’s important to other people.

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point of wanting to be an artist is that you want to change the way people look at the world. I can't build houses; I'm not a brain surgeon. All I have is a couple of laughs and revelations. I try to be honest with people.”

While Anderson can't confirm what's in store for *The Gruen Transfer* this year, there are plenty of advertising issues he's interested in discussing.

“Having worked in the radio industry, there's something I find really interesting; that's 'integration', he says. “Which is not cash for comment; it's not advertising. It's when the product is integrated into the fabric of the program.” Anderson also mentions the practice of “roaching”, a subtle word-of-mouth advertising campaign that often

happens in bars, and the lucrative industry of product placement in films.

“Studies have found that the average person is shown 3000 commercial images a day,” Anderson says. “We could make 40 episodes every year for the next 10 years and we would not run out of stuff to talk about

Anderson would still like to have an international stand-up career. “Coming out of last year, I want to do things that I am happy about, not what other people think I should be doing,” he says. “I don't want to think; at 45, ‘Oh, I wish I'd tried that.’”

The second series of The Gruen Transfer begins at the end of March. Check your TV guide for details. The first series is available on DVD, SRP \$29.95.