

Wentworth prison drama with Pamela Rabe returns for fifth season



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Foxtel's award-winning Australian prison drama *Wentworth* returns for a fifth season, again featuring a cast of splendidly strong female characters inhabited with wonderful humanity by one of the best ensemble casts we've seen on local TV. Meticulously prepared and produced with admirable cinematic knowhow, it's been an enormous hit internationally too, now screening in 140 countries, with the show being locally adapted in three different languages (productions in Germany, The Netherlands and Belgium) and more in development.

When it landed in Britain, critics found it more entertaining than US drama *Orange is the New Black*, Jenji Kohan's long-running and critically applauded look at the reality of women's prisons in the US — the racial diversity, the serious socioeconomic disadvantage of most inmates, and the indifference and cruelty dished out by prison staff.

The Australian show nonetheless left them a little bemused, even if there was a similar cheeky kind of prurience in its presentation and the same disturbing tangle of plots within plots. And there's a not dissimilar prevailing mood of moral ambiguity and cynicism as to the motives and efficacy of the forces of law and order.

"Even so, it remains a rare example of a dramatic world in which lesbianism is not only normal, but the norm," wrote *The Telegraph's* Gerard O'Donovan. "It also shows a world in which women hold virtually all the power, albeit to no obviously edifying ends." But *The Independent's* Rachel Roberts caught the social subtext of the series, the way it raises "the question of why we continue to lock up some of the most vulnerable and damaged women in society for relatively petty offences". It's a question, she suggested, that has yet to be answered when so many women both in Britain and in Australia serve time for non-violent offences, themselves often the victims of serious crimes such as rape, sexual abuse or domestic violence.

And *Wentworth* continues to deal with the pathways, either chosen or imposed, that put women in the criminal justice system, and what really happens to them. In dealing with the stories of these women and those who work to keep them confined, the show also addresses the ways we are all caught up in the institutional power struggles that determine the fluctuations of our lives.

If you have never seen it — and it's easy to pick up, with the backstories of the characters carefully reprised inside the new story arcs — it champions those who challenge the social order, its storylines knotting into one another and splitting apart, sometimes resolved and sometimes not, its humour dark and sobering.

The shocking ending of the previous season is cleverly re-presented in a beautifully edited sequence before the story resumes in the days following Bea Smith's (Danielle Cormack) tragic demise at the hands of former prison governor Joan Ferguson (Pamela Rabe). Be was violently stabbed to death in the prison's no-man's land. The new season picks up with the prisoners laying flowers on her grave. She's buried next to her daughter Debbie, murdered in an earlier episode, her grave bearing the inscription: "They loved each other to the moon and back."



Pamela Rabe as the formidable Joan Ferguson.

It's going to take a while to forget Bea.

Emotional, psychological and professional repercussions still hit the shocked inmates and staff of the correctional centre. Prison governor Vera Bennett (Kate Atkinson) is under pressure from Corrective Services and, with Will Jackson (Robbie Magasiva) on suspension, she is relying more on her deputy Jake Stewart (Bernard Curry), with no inkling the devious Stewart is now seemingly under Ferguson's control.

There's an external investigation into the "hot shot" Allie Novak (Kate Jenkinson) received in the showers at the end of the last season, hospitalising her. The perpetrator apparently was Ferguson, even though the records show she was locked in a medical holding cell in solitary at the time. And any footage was conveniently wiped from the surveillance systems.

So much awe surrounds Ferguson that she seems to possess supernatural powers, a Hannibal Lecter-like superhuman cunning and lack of empathy, though Rabe, a performer of unerring grace and authenticity, is such an accomplished actress she avoids the melodrama, turning Ferguson into one of the most believable villains we've seen on the local screen.

As she seeks vengeance and possibly redemption at the same time — it's hard to know at this point — new top dog Kaz (Tammy Macintosh) has a challenge to restore order among the traumatised inmates, especially as Ferguson is released back into general confinement, her lawyer citing human rights abuses, the former governor not deemed dangerous until a court rules otherwise. Kaz calls a moratorium on violence between the women; Ferguson, meanwhile, is to be treated as invisible, no one engaging with her.

If that's not enough in the storyline department, former top dog Franky (Nicole Da Silva), having gone straight and now living in the outside world with her lover, prison psychologist Bridget Westfall (Libby Tanner), in contravention of her parole obligations, is being stalked by the violent Michael Pennisi (Felix Williamson). In what she now sees as a previous life, Franky scarred him in an incident involving a frying pan full of scalding fat.

It's really been Bea Smith's journey since the series started: the former hairdresser who once ran a small but profitable salon, and, powerless in an abusive marriage, found herself forced into a desperate action that landed her in Wentworth. In prison she was placed in a situation where some sort of violence or criminality became a moral necessity, shepherding a group of other women who appealed to her for justice denied to them because of social prejudice, government inflexibility or the corruption of those in power.

There was something almost mythic about Cormack's Bea, that aura of steel-tempered toughness that was simply a kind of psychic armour to allow her to survive. She was a wonderful creation who crossed the boundaries of civilisation and entered a realm of disorder and lawlessness in which violence was inevitable.

But now the show's main story arc seems to be the journey of Rabe's superbly realised Ferguson, a villain as the ultimate outsider, her face lit like a tragic mask, magically aloof but full of contradictions — and it turns out some stunning street moves when it comes to a physical scrap. She is now to fully occupy our minds if her actions in the first episode are any indication.

But watch for the Franky story to develop too — maybe these two forces of female nature will clash again. Atkinson's Bennett is fascinating too, the governor seemingly victimised by the system, battling for control, fighting off the rigours of overwork and nervous strain, and holding too many secrets in her busy brain. It's Atkinson's voice that grabs you in every scene — the way it so tellingly conveys both authority and vulnerability. She's surrounded by actresses of greater presence but she makes hers felt in every scene.

The show is again superbly directed, this time with Mat King at the helm and he has maintained the feel of Kevin Carlin's original approach. With director of photography Kathy Chambers, he maintains the highly cinematic look of the earlier seasons, even pushing a little further with the use of telephoto-style lenses to compress and flatten the space between objects; they often appear pressed together around the characters, creating a sense of claustrophobia and congestion.

You can almost smell the fear and despair. And the excitement too. Chambers doesn't merely photograph the action; her choice of lenses and angles comments on it. The shallow depth of field also allows her to focus on a narrow plane of action, especially in the scenes involving Ferguson, blurring the rest of the image, guiding our attention.

She gives us a sense of reality that is elusive, ambiguous and sometimes ungraspable, just as it is for the characters. The sense of claustrophobia is almost palpable — as if we were somehow in the scene, too; the point of view is that of an insider, the visual clues and connections, not always instantly clear, adding to the drama.

And what drama is packed into the first 50 minutes of the new season.

Wentworth returns on April 4, 8.30pm, Showcase.