Lisa McCune

MODERN FAMILY

With three teenage kids, Lisa McCune knows a thing or two about family comedy. Happily single, she talks to **Susan Horsburgh** about life in the time of COVID-19, the complexity of parenting, and learning to ignore the critics.



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When Lisa McCune's family – and most of the world – went into isolation in March, her 14-year-old daughter Remy announced an ambitious plan to watch every episode of *Blue Heelers*, the 1990s cop drama that made her mum Australia's sweetheart and a four-time *TV Week* Gold Logie winner. Remy's proposed TV marathon sounds like a sweet act of daughterly devotion, but Lisa has no delusions.

"She'll just bag me," says the 49-year-old actor, laughing. "She'll just go, 'Oh Mum, you're so bad!' She adores me, I know she does, but they like giving me a hard time as well."

Such is life in a family full of teenagers. As Lisa chats to *The Weekly* on the phone (our shoot was done previously), Remy and 16-year-old Oliver are remote learning, their schools shut down by the coronavirus pandemic, while 18-year-old uni student Archer is holed up at home too, enlisted to help his mum in the garden. Like most parents around the country, Lisa is trying to keep her kids busy, calculating the household toilet paper requirements and contemplating an uncertain future.

She has arrived home in Melbourne only a few days earlier from Sydney, where the acclaimed Bell Shakespeare production of *Hamlet* (in which she plays Gertrude) has shut down. It was the last show to leave the Sydney Opera House. "There was something very eerie," she says, "about this almighty icon going dark."

With the country in quarantine, the COVID-19 crisis may have capsized her work and home life, but not all the adjustments have been unwelcome. "As a family we're talking a lot – I'm insisting everybody have dinner together," says Lisa. "There's a lot of laughter and I think that's because we're all slowing down a little bit."

Lisa suspects this period of enforced reflection will change us all. "I read somewhere it's like Mother Nature has sent us to our rooms to have a think about a few things," says Lisa. "In my generation we've had bad things happen, but this could actually be the first time we are going to be living in significant hardship and seeing it around us. I just want [my children] to help where they can and be good to people. I really think it's going to make them a bit more humble. My daughter hasn't asked for any new sneakers in about three days."

Whether it's lessons in humility, argy-bargy with the in-laws or screen-time stand-offs, family life has always made for rich storytelling fodder. "It's full of drama and life," says Lisa, "and that's why we make shows about it all the time." That's also why Lisa was drawn to the Network 10 comedy series *How to Stay Married*, which has just launched its second season.

Created by *The Project*'s Gold Logie-nominated comedian, Peter Helliar, the show chronicles the lives of Greg and Em Butler, a suburban couple married for 15 years who are trying to keep love alive amid the day-to-day dramas of surly teens, financial woes and flagging libidos. "I love the fact that, as much as this marriage goes though its ups and downs, it's at its core so full of love and humour," says Lisa. "They're both trying really hard."

In one episode, there's a flashback to Greg's 2003 marriage proposal: he buries the ring in Em's cheesy chicken parma before going down on bended knee in the pub toilets while she's in the throes of noisy gastro. Pete, who writes the show and stars as the hapless Greg, is apparently a joy to work with: "When he gets the giggles he can literally not stop," says Lisa. "It's this internal, I'm-going-to-self-combust laugh – he loses it for up to 30 minutes."

What she doesn't reveal is her part in Pete's laughing jags. In one scene, they were both wearing bathing suits and bathrobes and, unbeknownst to Pete, Lisa purloined a wig from the hair and make-up department to fashion a makeshift merkin. She flashed him mid-scene and it was all over. "There was an overgrown pubic region and there needed to be some back-burning going on," says Pete, laughing. "I just lost it. She has a wicked sense of humour that I think a lot of people wouldn't expect."

It's probably not surprising, however, that she's also "as lovely as you could ever hope". Lisa went to her screen daughters' school productions, says Pete, and took the older one to see Hugh Jackman's stage show. "Lisa McCune has no idea that she's Lisa McCune," says Pete. "She is there to help everyone, whether it's hair and make-up or catering. It's like it's her first day on set and she's really excited to be there and she just wants to help everyone out."

For Lisa, assuming the mindset of everywoman Em – who tries, and often fails, to balance work and parenting – isn't a stretch. "I totally get it – the whole thing of wanting to be a great mum but at the same time still wondering what's in life for you," she says. "I think a lot of mums go through that."

Lisa is now single but by no means parenting solo – "and I don't want that for my kids," she says. She and Tim Disney, whom she met when he was a props handler on the set of *Blue Heelers* and married in 2000, have an unconventional arrangement that works for them: "We all live on one property so we're here for the kids – we have to because our work is so all over the place," she says. "Tim and I are very much dual parenting. We are all over them as parents. I think it takes two people a lot of the time."







Clockwise from left: Lisa in *The Sound of Music*; with Martin Sacks on *Blue Heelers*; Lisa with her kids and mum; on set with Peter Helliar.



While she's open to dating "at some point", Lisa brushes off questions about her love-life, suggesting that romance is the least of her priorities at the moment. "I don't really think about any of that," she says. "I have a really full, rich life and things will come and go as they're meant to."

If she seems cagey it's understandable. In 2012, photos of Lisa kissing her *South Pacific* co-star Teddy Tahu Rhodes famously hit the gossip pages while the two of them were supposedly still married to other people, setting off a media feeding frenzy. Judgment and nastiness ensued.

Since then, her love life has been off limits. "I'm happily single," she says. "When I do have something to talk about, I will absolutely shout it from the rooftops, but I just want to talk about the things that are really important. I find that that[romantic] stuff starts to define who you are and it really doesn't need to."

In a career that's spanned three decades, Lisa has done everything from sitcoms to Shakespeare, indie films to opera. Media commentator David Knox studied at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts with Lisa in the late '80s, and says it was there that she perfected the "triple-threat" skills that have helped her thrive for so long in the arts industry. He remembers Lisa as a petite 17-year-old – the youngest-ever student to be accepted into WAAPA's music theatre course. "She had a sweet soprano voice," says David, the editor of *TV Tonight*, "and held her own alongside older, more worldly students."

In 1991, the Perth-raised actor made her first appearance in our living rooms – as checkout chick Lisa in the Coles TV commercials. Having just graduated from drama school and moved to Melbourne, the ads gave Lisa the official girl-next-door stamp of approval – "and now I'm the mum-next-door," she jokes. (For the record, Lisa is still a loyal Coles shopper, although apparently not getting any special toilet paper treatment.)

Lisa's big break, however, came when she was cast as Constable Maggie Doyle in *Blue Heelers*, which ran from 1994 to 2006 and became one of the →

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highest-rating shows in Australian TV history, with more than 2.5 million viewers every week at its peak. "Seven executives went on the record ahead of the show's launch saying they had found a new star," says David. "They were right. What you see is what you get, which is why Australians have taken her to their heart."

Lisa became the indisputable darling of the small screen and a serial *TV Week* cover girl, but after six years in fictional Mount Thomas, Lisa was ready to move on. In 2000 she left the show in a shower of bullets, and her death is still one of the most-watched moments on Australian television. Lisa has no intention, though, of joining Remy in her *Blue Heelers* binge: "I might watch a couple of scenes," she says, "but no, I'm such a move-forward person."

In a career studded with highlights, her first role after *Blue Heelers* – as Maria in *The Sound of Music* – stands out for Lisa. "Coming out on stage after the opening in Sydney and getting a standing ovation was a beautiful moment," she recalls. "I felt like [they were saying], 'It's okay, you can step away from one thing and do something else.'"

In a 2002 interview, Lisa wondered, "Can a popular girl be taken seriously?" She didn't have to wait long for her answer: the next year she took out the Green Room Award for her turn as Sally Bowles in *Cabaret*. She may have once yearned for professional credibility, but she has since learnt to ignore the critics and run her own race, chasing the roles that intimidate her.

"I want to be terrified now because it puts me in a place where you've got to keep learning and putting yourself out there," she says. "The other shift in me is that I actually probably don't care now what people on the outside say because ... I have had to thicken my skin a little bit. I've had so many hiccups along the way and I think that's part of your maturity in any profession. You can only ever go out and do your best.

"Some of the things that people write are mean. I've got a responsibility [to make sure] that the kids see me not being really upset about things that are written, because I want to teach them that if they read something [negative] that they've got the resilience to go, 'So what? That's on the person who wrote it.'"

Lisa says she's a hard worker but not especially ambitious; then again, she reasons, maybe she has just had so many opportunities she hasn't had to be. She certainly never felt compelled to try her luck in Hollywood.

"I always knew that I wanted to be a mum," she says. "If [Hollywood] had have come my way it would have been great, but I had Archer at 30, which is old in Hollywood terms, and I really wanted the kids to have a life here. And then I had one baby after another. All of a sudden I was a mum of three kids and working consistently – I felt like I was in a really good place. I don't like having regrets so I wouldn't change anything that I've done in the past."

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Almost two decades into motherhood, she reckons she is still no closer to cracking the code. "I don't know how to be a parent," says Lisa, who counts Steve Biddulph and Arne Rubinstein among her favourite parenting experts. "I said to my eldest the other day, 'I haven't done this before – I'm going to make mistakes and I just want you to be happy, but let's try and navigate it the best we can.'"

Lisa makes a point of giving her teens the space and independence they crave, which means respecting their wishes that she not follow them on social media. Still, she feels there's a safety net: "I've had the odd phone call from other parents saying, 'I think there's a post you might want to get taken down' – you know, 'The bikini shots are a little bit too bikini'," she says. "That's what's terrific about community."

Her career holds little interest for the kids – except maybe when the annual *TV Week* Logies invitation arrives. ("Ollie came one year and had a photo taken with Jen Hawkins," she says. "You've never seen a happier face!") Which is fine by her. "I want to talk about what's going on in their lives – I don't really want to talk about mine," she says. "I love watching them step into adulthood and I don't want them to feel as though they can't make mistakes in life because they will and we all do. I'm trying to just be in the kitchen standing there with a buttered Vegemite Salada if they need it."

Lisa turns 50 next February and seems unfazed by the prospect. A natural homebody, she jokes that quarantine life is a breeze for her, gardening, reading and cooking. Yesterday she hauled out her hand-cranked machine and made pasta for the first time; she loves nothing more than a project.

"Life affords us so much more time to do that as we're not madly buzzing around being social butterflies anymore," she says. "I love going out every now and then but the idea of an all-nighter, drinking and seeing the sun come up – that makes me feel so vile."

Whether she'll still feel like that post-hibernation remains to be seen. Lisa had toyed with the idea of a trip overseas to celebrate her 50th, but the coronavirus may well put the kybosh on that. "I'll see how things play out during the year," says Lisa, "but I think I'll probably want to do something outside the house!"

In the years ahead, Lisa wants to support her younger kids through high school, get fit, and tread the boards again. "As entertainers we can't wait to get out there and do what we do best, which is tell our stories," she says. "I'm going to make [the next decade] so damn joyous and fulfilling. I'm going to hammer it – I'm not slowing down for anything." **AWW**

How to Stay Married *airs Tuesday nights on Network 10. Catch up on tenplay.com.au.*



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