

Home-grown but far out

An American-funded but Australian-made series is boldly going beyond where sci-fi series have dared to go.

Anthony Simcoe is somewhere inside a thick layer of foam latex which has transformed him from an Earthling to General Ka D'Argo, a fierce warrior with long tentacles sprouting from his head. This figure, his moustache styled into four neat plaits, is far removed from the suburban concerns of Steve Kerrigan, the character Simcoe played in *The Castle*.

The vast difference between the roles is one of the reasons Simcoe signed on to *Farscape*, the wildly imaginative, extravagantly realised science-fiction series being shot on a sprawling industrial site at Homebush Bay in Sydney's western suburbs.

"Australian storytellers are condemned to cop and doctor shows, family feuds," observed Simcoe with a distinctly human-sounding chuckle, "so it's nice to be able to tell stories in a different genre."

"I love it because I get to be D'Argo, I get to be the weird-looking alien on the ship."

Farscape, the brainchild of Brian Henson (son of the late Muppets creator Jim Henson), Robert Halmi jr, CEO of Hallmark Entertainment and producer of visual feasts such as *Merlin* and *Moby Dick*, and Rockne S O'Bannon (*Alien Nation*, *SeaQuest DSV*), is also unlike traditional science fiction, offering a lot of what most programs in the genre don't: romance, humour, richly textured relationships, a strong female point of view and, oh yes, some far-out plot twists based on all of the above.

"We are going to be a lot more daring than the other science-fiction TV shows," promised Henson, who manages Jim Henson Productions and the famous Creature Shop in London.

Farscape centres on the only Earthling on the show, US astronaut John Crichton (Ben Browder), a boyishly handsome scientist who gets lost during a routine space shuttle mission and lands in the middle of a running battle between warring aliens.

He falls in with a band of misfits, all of whom are trying to get back to their respective home planets aboard a biomechanical (keep that in mind) ship called Moya.

Headstrong, raven-haired humanoid Aeryn Sun (Claudia Black) is also aboard, and when her eyes lock with Crichton's, it's clear that there's more going on up there than wishing upon a star.

Also aboard are Simcoe's D'Argo; doe-eyed, blue-toned priestess Pa'u Zotoh Zhaan (an unrecognisable Virginia Hey); and a pair of vivid



IN OTHER WORLDS: (From left) Anthony Simcoe, Claudia Black, rubbery figure Rygel, Ben Browder and Virginia Hey in their *Farscape* roles.

characters crafted by the Creature Shop: frog-like Rygel (voiced by Jonathan Hardy), a deposed king with a head full of star-crossed schemes, and the ship's seemingly omniscient control centre Pilot (voiced by Lani John Tupu, who also plays Crichton's arch-enemy, Officer Bialar Crais).

"It's a crew ready for adventure and a few laughs," Henson said. "They're edgy and alien, but you'd still love to invite them into your house. You take people to a movie and introduce them to some scary characters, but in TV ultimately they have to be characters you'd like to have over for a tea party."

Alice In Wonderland's tea party, it seems.

As relationships evolve and plot twists abound, romance is found in unlikely places. In an episode to air in the first 22-part series, Moya, the living spaceship, has a fling with an enemy craft, gets pregnant and gives birth to a spirited offspring that's the bio bit of biomechanical.

"We're now entertaining a very sophisticated audience," Henson explains. "Sometimes you have to embrace their cynicism and either make a joke with them or go in a direction you really aren't allowed to go. So, right when they think they know what's going to happen, you try to twist it hard in a direction that will surprise them."

Browder, the only American in the cast, suggested that *Farscape's* hybrid culture – made in Australia using Australian actors, directors and crews but funded off-shore – fostered its original tone.

"It's not like any science-fiction show which is on TV at the moment," he said, in a break from

rehearsals on the set of Moya's love-child ship, Talon, which looks remarkably like a 70s disco with its flashing lights and red metallic tubing.

"Unlike most science-fiction shows, there's an irreverent tone. We have the capacity to go from being deadly serious to completely comedic."

Farscape's innovative ideas and strong female characters were the draw-card for Black, last seen in *Good Guys, Bad Guys*.

"It is original," said Black, her toned body encased in black leather. "I have watched some science fiction in my time and when I look at projects like this, I want to see if there is something fresh there. This is highly imaginative, very creative."

As is to be expected, all the makeup, costumes, sets and effects do not come cheap (or quickly for that matter; it takes three hours to transform Hey and two hours to transform Simcoe every morning).

While the producers are tight-lipped about the budgets, it's estimated each episode costs more than \$2 million, making it easily the most expensive television series to be made in Australia.

Still, the outlay has paid off, with *Farscape* becoming the highest-rating show on the US Sci Fi Channel. It also wins its timeslot in the UK, and the series' fan-driven websites number in the hundreds.

All that remains to be seen now is how *Farscape* will fare with the home crowd in Australia.

Farscape premieres on May 20 on Channel 9.