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It's 7:00 on a foggy September morning and the cast of the hit CTV sitcom *Corner Gas* is on familiar ground—pumping premium and, in the process, pumping the show. Over the next couple of hours nearly 300 lucky Vancouver

drivers will fill up for free,

even if they've never heard of the popular sitcom. "Haven't seen it yet," the driver of a gas guzzling Ford pickup truck tells me. "But anybody that buys me something gets a chance." Welcome words for *Corner Gas* co-creator and lead, Brent Butt. "Most of what I'm doing," he admits between fill ups, "is handing out the contract that says they'll be watching the show."

CAFE

The Ruby

Images courtesy of CTV.



NER GAS

CTV
Pumps
Out a Hit
By Dale Drewery

Nine thousand litres and some \$7,500 later, the cast is seated on the set of *The Vicki Gabereau Show* talking about the show's unprecedented success. Last year, more than one million viewers tuned in each week to see a show about a gas station in a tiny Canadian town in the middle of nowhere. The numbers astounded even Butt. "It really hit home to me when we beat *Hockey Night in Canada* a couple of times," he says. "To me, that was mind boggling!"

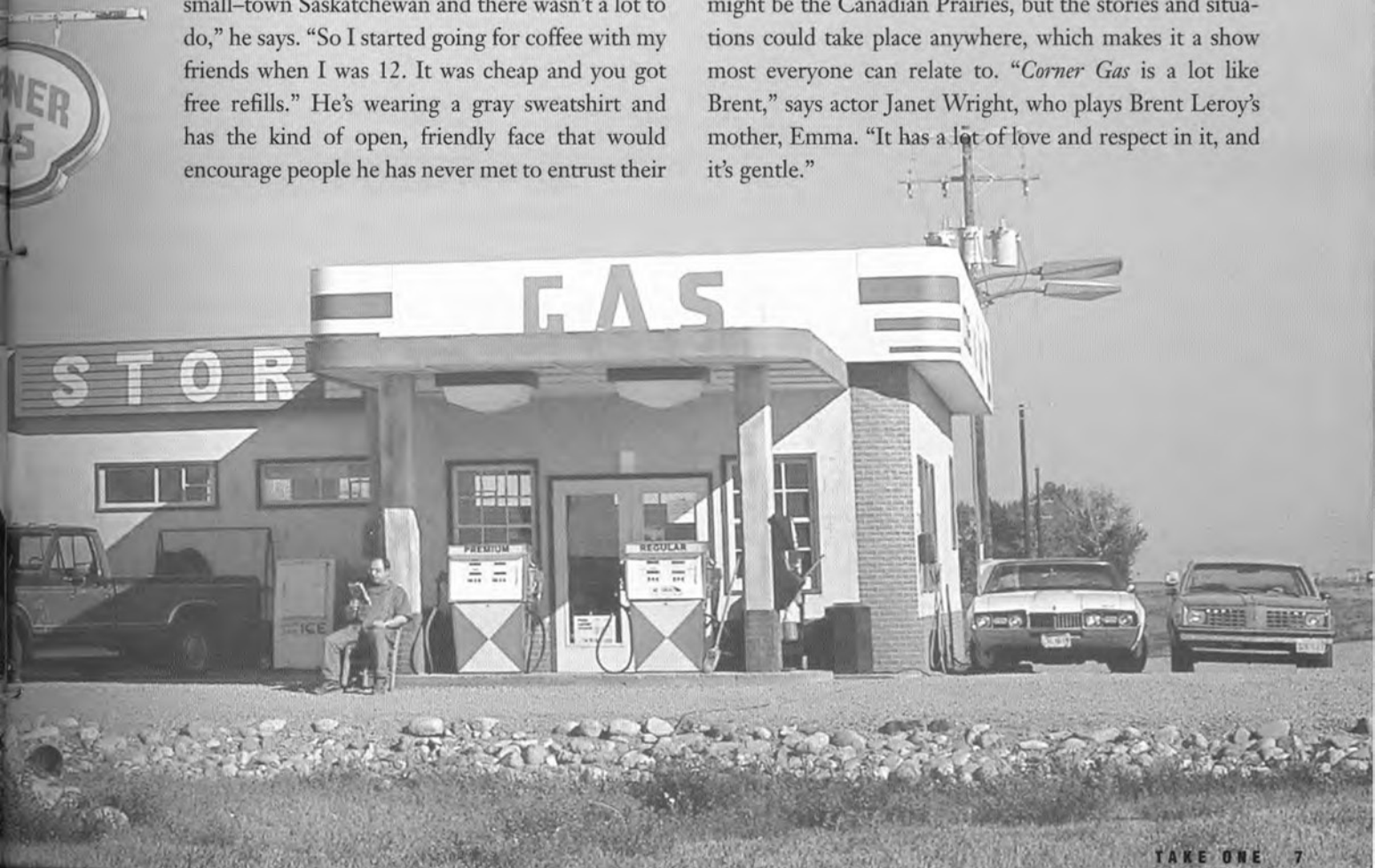
children to him. The character Butt plays on *Corner Gas*, Brent Leroy, is just as unassuming. In fact, Leroy is what Butt might have become had he never left Saskatchewan—a laid back but quick-witted gas station owner surrounded by an assortment of quirky friends and eccentric family members.

Nothing much happens in the fictional town of Dog River, and that's part of *Corner Gas's* charm. The show's

"It really hit home to me when we beat *Hockey Night in Canada* a couple of times." – Brent Butt

Butt has returned to Vancouver from shooting the second season of *Corner Gas* and has agreed to meet for coffee at a downtown hotel. "I grew up in small-town Saskatchewan and there wasn't a lot to do," he says. "So I started going for coffee with my friends when I was 12. It was cheap and you got free refills." He's wearing a gray sweatshirt and has the kind of open, friendly face that would encourage people he has never met to entrust their

humour lies in the minutia of daily life. By focusing on the regular goings on of a tiny community, Butt has created a program that has surprisingly broad appeal. The setting might be the Canadian Prairies, but the stories and situations could take place anywhere, which makes it a show most everyone can relate to. "*Corner Gas* is a lot like Brent," says actor Janet Wright, who plays Brent Leroy's mother, Emma. "It has a lot of love and respect in it, and it's gentle."



Of course, that's not what Wright was thinking when she first heard about the show. "My agent called me up and said, 'Oh, I've got an audition for you,' and of course agents will send you to anything," Wright says with her throaty laugh. "She said it was for a Canadian sitcom called *Corner Gas*, and I went, 'Oh, great. That sounds terrific. That's really what I want to do.' Anyway, I read the script and it actually tickled me." The cast, which also features veteran performer Eric Peterson, is largely Vancouver-based and includes actors Tara Spencer-Nairn from *New Waterford Girl*, Gabrielle Miller and Nancy Robertson. "I call them the 'size zero girls,'" Wright says, "because they really do wear size zero. Thank God I've always been a character actress."

Corner Gas is filmed in the real-life town of Rouleau, 45 minutes from Regina. It's almost home turf for Wright who grew up in Saskatoon and confesses to having a love/hate relationship with the province. "It's six in the morning," she recalls with a wince, "and you're driving to the location in Rouleau and you're going, 'I wish we could do everything in the studio in town.' And then you start looking at the sky, which comes right down to the ground and changes all the time, and there's this feeling that you're such a small speck in the world."

It is a perspective that has helped Wright through an extremely difficult year. In January of 2004, her 23-year-old daughter, Rachel, was shot and killed when she tried to break up a Vancouver street fight. Four months later

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Wright was preparing to return to Saskatchewan to shoot season two. "I really didn't want to go," she admits. "In fact, I was almost angry about having to go. But part of me said, 'Janet, this is going to save your butt.'" She laughs out loud at the inadvertent pun. Wright is perhaps best known for her role as the feisty Ethel Shatford in Wolfgang Peterson's *The Perfect Storm*. "A lot of the parts I play are the long-suffering, tough ladies—the heavier roles," she says. "Emma (Leroy) is sort of the same, except she's funny."

Funny is *Corner Gas*'s top priority. It's more important than logic, more crucial than tone and it gets Brent Butt out of bed in the morning. "I am a lazy, lazy man," he confesses, "and there are few things that will convince me to get up at 5 a.m. on a regular basis. *Corner Gas* is one of them. I don't sleep in for this show, and I sleep in for almost everything else in my life." Perhaps it's because, as writer and producer, he finally has creative control. "I've had shows where the process has crushed the life out of them," he recalls, "where accountants are actually giving notes on the jokes. I've had shows where I'm not allowed in the editing room. Imagine putting something in the can and then watching it with the rest of the country. It's very disheartening because you can see 1,000 little things that are wrong with it that could



Gabrielle Miller

easily have been fixed if somebody who did comedy for a living had been allowed to contribute.”

This time around Butt is able to oversee each step of the way, including assembling *Corner Gas*'s team of writers. “We all come from a

Not only does the script contain the unexpected, so does the show. Many of the episodes introduce well-known people who appear out of nowhere and disappear just as quickly. “We can have these crazy guest stars without

justifying why they are in Dog River, Saskatchewan,” Butt says, “and they don't always play themselves. The Tragically Hip does a cameo this year, but they are just referred to as some local kids. Last year The Man from Glad was one of my favourite cameos. We then had Pamela Wallin steal a chocolate bar from the gas station. Having the freedom to do this is great because sometimes you're writing a script and you suddenly say, ‘This'd



Brent Butt as *Corner Gas*'s Brent Leroy

live-comedy performing background,” he says, “and we all know what it takes to make audiences laugh. So we really labour over the jokes. There have been two-hour conversations about the number of syllables in a sentence.” The devil, as the saying goes, is in the details. “There are a million reasons a joke doesn't work,” Butt points out, “like subtle distractions, rhythms in language and alliteration. Sometimes you can just look at a sentence and go, ‘Well, this would be way funnier if it had a word with a double-O sound in it, like goose or soup.’”

be funny if David Suzuki were in it.’ Then you contact him and see if he'll do it. I just pulled that name out of the hat, by the way. He's not making a cameo on the show. Not a bad idea, mind you.”

Nor was Colin James, the *Snow Birds* or Darryl Sittler a bad idea. They are all celebrated this season in understated *Corner Gas* fashion. There's something infinitely rewarding about watching a subtle and sophisticated television program that features those Canadians that only other Canadians would recognize. That is, of course, until

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the episode about the American tourist who knows significantly more about our great land than the residents of Dog River will ever know.

When Brent Butt is done with his *Corner Gas* duties for the season he plans to do a little standup comedy. "Just because there's nothing better," he says, "than getting up somewhere and doing a set. That's my favourite thing to do, by far." He'll be doing it for free, which is just fine by Butt, who, thanks to the show, has financial stability for the first time in his life. So what is he doing with his hard-earned riches? "I haven't been buying anything because I've been settling up back taxes," he admits. "And I haven't had time to shop because

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— Brent Butt

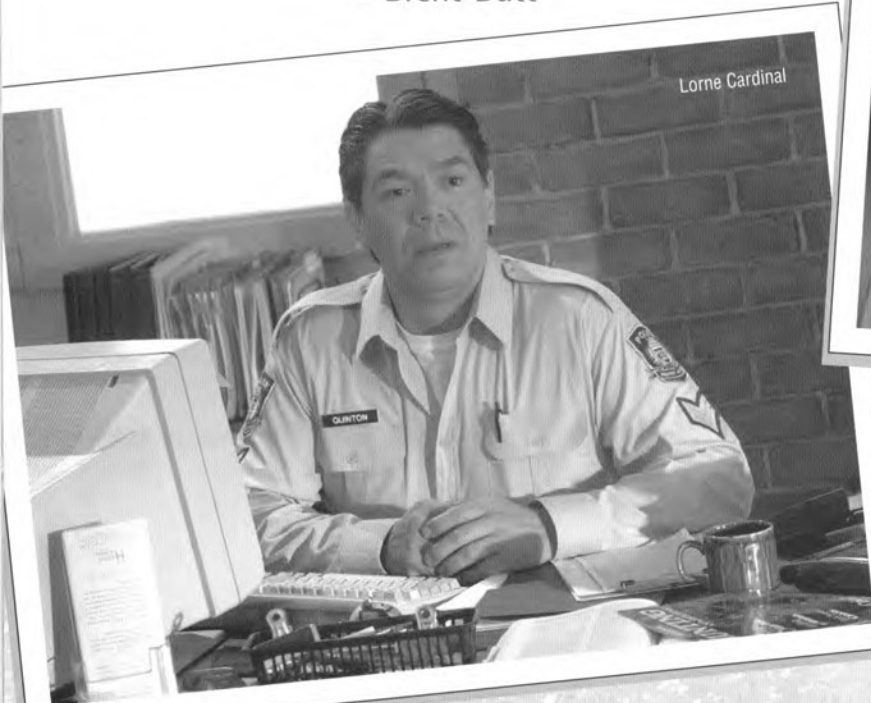
Janet Wright and Eric Peterson



Tara Spencer-Nairn



Lorne Cardinal



the show has kept me so busy. I can think of one sport coat that I bought." It is a scenario worthy of *Corner Gas*.

Dale Drewery is a Vancouver-based journalist and television producer.