



The Dan Show

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Strap on your masks and break out the hand sanitiser – *The Dan Show* is back for a fourth season, sans Dan!

Debuting in March 2020, *The Dan Show* follows bumbling anti-hero Dan Andrews as he veers from one authoritarian edict or bureaucratic bungle to another, fronting up at each episode's press conference to escape, *MacGyver*-like, from any and all consequence or accountability.

From an initial run of 'two weeks to flatten the curve', the absurdist daytime melodrama ran for a mammoth 111-day second season later in 2020. While unpopular with many viewers, *The Dan Show* achieved a cult following (and we use that term deliberately) among a mix of millennials and public servants, spurring a wave of weird and annoying pop culture references, memes and Twitter hashtags.

But the show's runaway ratings success came less from its narrow fan base and more from its unfortunate cultural significance. Just as office workers repeated *Seinfeld* jokes around the water

cooler in the 90s, discussion of things like ‘rolling case averages’ and ‘moving from stage 4 to stage 3A’ dominated Zoom calls and park bench chatter throughout 2020. Each season, *The Dan Show* has had a literal captive audience.

So this year, the ‘best medical advice’ commissioned a special run of five episodes to coincide with the Australian Open and, later, the recently-extended fourth season, airing daily at the usual indeterminate time.

Season four opens with the gang scrambling to contain the latest outbreak of the ‘wicked virus’ that seems to be especially wicked in Victoria. But things are grim: The state is broke, people are frustrated, and the feds are (initially anyway) refusing to bankroll yet another lockdown. And so the cast must muddle through the latest self-inflicted catastrophe – without Dan.

To make matters worse, Victoria’s ‘gold standard’ contact tracing system is still in its beta-testing stage. This, we’re told, means that the state government is ‘neck-and-neck’ with the virus, conjuring up the rich imagery of thousands of generously-remunerated public servants firing up the fax machine in a race against time to account for the three or four or five cases that are announced at the start of each episode.

The underlying tension of the last three seasons is still there, as we wait for the incompetence and cluelessness of the characters to catch up with them. But as usual, the cast of politicians and public servants manages to find a way out of the public health pickle they’ve created. An early victory in season four is the battle with the feds, who cave just a few episodes in and agree to underwrite not only this lockdown, but every future one, in perpetuity.

But it’s just not believable anymore. Clearly, they’ve kept the series running too long, and resorted to patently absurd plotlines to pad out fourteen long episodes (at least). The palpably weary Brett Sutton falls flat as he howls about a ‘beast’ of the new new new ‘variant’ – but in real life almost every prominent epidemiologist in the country has confirmed that the ‘Indian strain’ (or ‘Delta’ or ‘Charlie’ or ‘Foxtrot’ or whatever we’re calling these shards of virological hair-splitting – don’t even me started about that lame rebranding effort) is no more ‘fast-moving’ than the strain from last season.

And like *Two and a Half Men* after Charlie Sheen, this incarnation is sad and pointless without the main character. Or more aptly, it’s like the later seasons of *House of Cards* without the macabre and shameless Frank Underwood holding the show together.

With the original Dan departing the series, past bit-player James Merlino has been recast as the ‘Acting Premier’. He carries the usual lines, but the showmanship we’ve come to expect just doesn’t come through. Despite ourselves, we miss all the catchphrases, the Arnie-esque one-liners. Merlino attempts a few of the old favourites – like ‘Everyone right to go?’ and ‘Get tested’ – but he just can’t carry them like Dan used to.

When Merlino himself goes missing in one episode, the perennially terrified Martin Foley takes the helm. But his performance is so woeful that we actually start to miss Jenny Mikakos, who left the



show in season two after a fallout with the writing staff in the Premier's office.

The 'Testing Commander' from season three is back, apparently having been promoted to 'COVID Commander'. He weaves a convoluted and occasionally indecipherable plotline involving 'fleeting encounters' in Telstra stores and display homes. Again, the audience collectively groans here – over the course of this series we've gone from hospital system capacity, to deaths, to case numbers, and now to this bizarre metric of 'exposure sites'. The 'COVID Commander's' monologues grate and betray the writers' desperation.

Meanwhile, a complex backstory emerges as we find out that the 'Testing Commander' has no actual medical credentials whatsoever. Again, the audience's intelligence is insulted by the notion that this 'beast' of a virus is being navigated by a career bureaucrat whose past gigs include – of all the well-oiled machines in the state – Public Transport Victoria!

Deputy CHO Allan Cheng also makes the occasional appearance as the sober, reasonable doctor with a rare veneer of credibility. His scenes are the more interesting ones of this series, as we wait to see if (or when) he will make a stunning admission that blows the whole web of spin wide open.

In the absence of that, the audience is left waiting for the big payoff. What we need now is a heavy-hitter, like a return of Peta Credlin, or even Leigh Sales – who appalled *Dan Show* fans but delighted the rest of us with a surprise cameo in season three.

Or maybe, just maybe, the last episode could feature a surprise return of Dan, unkempt and unshaven, North Face jacket flung carelessly over his jamies, confessing that the boredom and monotony of sick leave has triggered an epiphany about the unconscionable destruction that he has wrought on us all.

Well, we can dream. In the meantime, *The Dan Show's* perverse importance to the minutiae of our daily lives makes it a regrettable must-watch this lockdown season.

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