

DRAMA SCHOOL

Episode breakdowns

Episode One: The Auditions:

The auditions for the National Institute of Dramatic Art begin. Tony Knight, head of acting for 10 years and his staff embark upon the gruelling culling process to select 26 students from over a thousand applicants. For some, getting into the prestigious institution is a lifetime obsession. It's Les' fifth and (he says) final attempt. Zoe comes from Queensland for her fourth go and Baylea, who got shortlisted the year before, has travelled all the way from New Zealand for her third try out. Others, like Romy (daughter of actor Belinda Giblin) and Robert, a dentist who's spent 5 years in the Air Force, are first timers.

For Anthony the stakes are even higher, he got in last year but had to withdraw after suffering depression and there's no guarantee he'll get back in this time. The auditions are brutal and exhausting. Our kids manage to make it through the first major attrition and get recalls to return for a second day. The numbers have dropped from 1,400 to a hundred but the competition is still very stiff. One by one they get up to perform - Zoe, Robert and Baylea sweat it out for the panel who work them hard. They make it to the next step... the shortlist.

Les, Romy and Anthony nervously await their turn in episode two.

Episode Two: D-Day

Les is nervous on his recall day, he flounders at first but, after some one-on-one work with Tony Knight, he squeezes onto the shortlist. Unfortunatley his mate Ben doesn't make it and there's a sad farewell as they go in opposite directions. In contrast, Romy shines for the panel and is quickly shortlisted. Anthony has to prove himself all over again. Despite giving a brilliant audition, the staff are still concerned he won't endure the three year training. Nonetheless he's shortlisted. Now the hardest test begins. On

Decision Day the staff gather to reduce the shortlist of 56 by half. Tensions mount as the numbers are painfully whittled down.

Zoe's voice is damaged by smoking – she may have nodules. Do they want to take the risk? Robert is very stiff. Romy's universally popular, while some like Les and others leave the panel equivocating. Baylea, from New Zealand, is perhaps too polished and then there's that accent. Anthony, whose acting talents are obvious, is finally offered a place on the proviso he can satisfy NIDA he is healthy enough to return. The other kids wait by the phone, fielding calls from anxious friends and family. Finally the list is complete and one by one Tony calls everyone to break the news - a task he hates. It's a brutal process, but at least everyone now knows the result. All that is, except Les who has been placed on tenterhooks for another month. He's "first reserve" if a place isn't taken up.

Episode Three: Boot Camp NIDA

The NIDA year begins. It brings bad news for Les; all the offers have been taken up. A lifelong dream evaporates. The terrified, but successful new NIDA students, Zoe, Romy and Anthony meet their new colleagues in first year and encounter the confident Third Year students amid speeches and theatrical antics. For the First Years the euphoria of being at NIDA diminishes as they discover acting is not a glamour occupation – it's sheer hard work. The exhausting training aims to stretch their physical and emotional limitations. Thom Campbell, from Tasmania, is only seventeen and the youngest in the year. He was born without a developed left hand but is already showing this won't impede his progress at NIDA. Zoe, Romy, Thomas quickly become a tight knit trio in this tough environment.

We also meet the Third Years who face their most difficult year. NIDA's task is to expose their talents to the major players – especially the agents - in a capricious industry. They are preparing for their first major production for the public. The stakes are high. Who will get the lead? Into this frantic first term of school a bomb is dropped.

It's announced Queen Elizabeth II wants to make a visit to the school during her Australian tour. The school has just two weeks to prepare.

Episode Four: The Queen

The preparations for the 'casual' forty minute Royal Tour around NIDA are nightmarish, involving endless rounds of security and protocol meetings. The day the Queen arrives it's pouring – NIDA turns surreal as the bomb squad crawls over the campus with sniffer dogs. But like any show by the time she steps in the door, it's picture perfect. The First Years sing for her and she watches a rehearsal of the sometimes offensive and violent play, *The Ugly Man*. Her Majesty doesn't bat an eyelid. Then, like a dream, she's gone and it's back to business. Zoe gets a shock at the voice disorder unit. Her voice – a crucial acting tool - is severely damaged and she must give up smoking or face an operation. Anthony starts to miss classes and concerns are raised in staff meetings. Is his depression recurring again? The First Years get their first assessments. Anthony gets a bollocking and is told to get his act together. Zoe's given an ultimatum - get rid of the fags, while golden girl Romy swans through.

Meanwhile, the Third Years' rehearsals are not going well. They get through their opening nights, but are uncertain what impact they have made. The all powerful agent's who attended are not permitted to approach them about representation until after Agent Auditions Day at the end of the year. For now all they get is a harrowing feedback session from John Clark, head of NIDA for 31 years and no one's fool. He pulls no punches. One by one the 3rd year performances are dissected – some like, Aime and Dan, viciously. It leaves a bitter taste. There is still a long way to go.

Episode Five: This Glamorous Life

It's the First Year's turn to endure their first tough acting test. Kevin Jackson has a reputation as one of the toughest teachers in the business. His job is to push them where they are afraid to go. If they thought it was hard so far, the game just got harder. He works them to the bone. They are split into pairs and rehearse difficult scenes they will eventually perform in front of the school. The pressure is on. Zoe and Anthony

have been given a particularly difficult and emotional scene. With Anthony's history of depression he fears he may not cope. Zoe is determined to have her voice in top shape for Kevin and attempts to give up smoking...again. Romy heads off to the orthodontist to see what she can do about her large front teeth. She may need braces, which she fears will affect the roles she will get. Thom also sees a specialist to decide whether he wants to get a prosthetic hand for performing. Meanwhile, the Third Years have a challenge of their own: Notorious theatre director Barrie Kosky is directing their graduating show to be performed at the Sydney Opera House. To create the self-devised show, they are working fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. With only two weeks before they open, Socratis, Lauren, Gen, Aime and Dan still have no idea how the show will come together.

Episode Six: Stage Fright

The Third Years arrive at the Opera House with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Rehearsals are still not going to plan and the strain is starting to show. Will the show be ready in time for a public audience, their first outside the safety net of NIDA? Family, critics, fellow students and the all-important agents will be watching – and this time the general public. Gen's entire family have driven from Adelaide. The show is a provocative send up of our national identity. There are fears about how it will be received.

Tense times also for the First Years who are given some frank feedback from Tony about their scene work the night before they perform for an audience. Anthony succumbs to the pressure and is rushed to the hospital with a suspected stomach ulcer. It's only a few hours before they're due on stage and without a partner Zoe won't be able to perform. He returns just in time and the scene work is received with enthusiasm, but the glory is shortlived. The acting staff meet to discuss the First Years' assessments. These mid-year results are going to come as a rude shock for some. Thom and Romy have other more personal dramas to deal with. After much deliberation, Thom is fitted for a hand and Romy realises that despite her fears, braces are her only option.

Episode Seven: Agent's Week

The culmination of the Third Years' gruelling training is decided in a single audition performance on Agent's Day. As the joke goes at NIDA "you audition to get in, you audition to get out". The pressure is on to find the perfect piece to perform for the agents. The students only have three minutes each to make an impression and snare a prestige agent. The stakes are higher than any other performance at NIDA. Some may graduate without representation at all. To add to the already tense atmosphere, there's a rumour that the school's most famous graduate is expected any minute. Mel Gibson drops in for an informal surprise visit – and offers some useful advice.

Meanwhile, the First Years are given a serve from Tony about their poor attendance. With the final assessments looming, the prognosis is not good. Some will not make it to their second year. Although Zoe's voice is starting to improve, her attendance record is bad. It's a 'sackable' offence and the pressure is on.

(NOTE: we don't know yet whether 8 or 9 episodes will screen on Seven)

Episode Eight: The Never Ending Audition

The Third Years have had to wait a week since Agent's Day. A good agent can have a huge impact on their future work prospects. Finally they're called into Tony's office to find out who, if any, of the agents wish to represent them. Emotional farewells by staff and fellow students follow as the graduates pass into an industry where 90% of actors are out of work. At the same time, the First Years' future is being discussed by the NIDA staff and the Board of Studies. This is their final assessment and it will determine whether all the First Years will be invited back next year or whether some will be cast aside. Rumours begin to circulate about the impending 'cull'. Outside, thousands line-up yet again for the annual NIDA auditions. Unbelievably, Les who just missed out last year and swore it was his last attempt, is back again for a sixth time. He is joined by former rugby league star and 'gay icon', Ian Roberts who is passionate about making a new career change.

Episode Nine: The Final Curtain

The First Years find out who stays at NIDA for a second year and who will not be invited back – five unsuspecting souls don't make it. Tony, Head of Acting, surprisingly reveals he didn't make it into his second year when he attended NIDA as a student many years ago - so he knows exactly what they're going through. But the Third Years are beginning to reap the fruits of their labour. We see recent graduate Socratis waltz into a job with the Sydney Theatre Company, Gen on tour in New York and Amie on the set of a new television series. Sadly, others in their year aren't as lucky...well, not yet. The reality of life as an actor becomes abundantly clear.

Meanwhile, as hundreds of hopefuls fail to get past the first hurdle both Les and Ian make it through to the final shortlist for the 2001 intake. D-Day is here once again and the staff must decide which of the 61 finalists will be offered one of the 26 places. Will Tony's phone call to Les finally allow him to fulfil his childhood dream of getting into NIDA? Will Ian Roberts be offered the chance to pursue a new career on stage?

Finally, as the NIDA graduates begin to make an impact in the 'real world' they assess what three years at NIDA has meant. It's a family, it's a boot camp, it's both confronting and comforting. And it's a launching pad into the world of acting like no other.