

Squizzy and an ego this big

July 18, 2013

[Read later](#)

Paul Kalina

Meet the original charismatic crime boss, Leslie 'Squizzy' Taylor.



Derring-do: 1920s Australia's Squizzy Taylor, who preceded Al Capone in America, is the protagonist of the latest *Underbelly* series.

Close to a century separates the lives of the late Carl Williams and Leslie "Squizzy" Taylor, the protagonists of the first and most recent instalments of the *Underbelly* crime series.

Williams and Taylor share many characteristics, though one opted for dapper, bespoke pinstripes, the other for velour tracksuits; one sought the glamorous high life, the other apparently preferring beer, chips and a comfortable recliner.

Sartorial splendour aside, both were small-time hoods whose dash, balls and derring-do saw crime move from dingy back alleys to the mainstream of Melbourne. Both yearned for celebrity and notoriety and courted the media, cultivating a self-image that was often at odds with the trying circumstances of their daily lives.

Diminutive figures, they surrounded themselves with the muscle that was needed to intimidate their opponents and, often with the help of fellow rogues who could be "bought", exploited the processes of justice to save their own skins.

And though Taylor survived prison, unlike Williams, he too discovered what a brutal place it could be.

"He pioneered organised crime, the gangster that has become a (film and TV) genre, the Al Capone, the modern-day Carl Williams," says 23-year-old Jared Daperis who plays the legendary "Squizzy" in the sixth instalment of the Nine Network/Screentime crime franchise.

"He did it above and beyond anyone else, I think. His yearning for celebrity, his charisma and charm... but no one did it like Squizzy Taylor. He didn't benchmark himself on anyone else. He was five foot two [157.5



Jared Daperis stars as legendary gangster Squizzy Taylor.

centimetres], dressed sharp and wanted respectability.

"That charisma mixed with criminality is exciting, and something we haven't seen before."

Fame rather than fortune drove Taylor, and led to his ultimate downfall. As we see in *Underbelly: Squizzy*, such was his appetite for fame he found a photographer - amusingly played by a cross-dressing Hannah Gadsby - to follow him around and document his deeds, the early 20th century's answer to Instagram.

"He left with nothing," Daperis says, "which just shows it was an intoxication of his ego as opposed to making some cash and settling down."

This being *Underbelly*, sex is a significant part of the story. As the show begins, Squizzy is in love with Dolly Grey (Camille Keenan), a part-time prostitute and thief who he casts aside as he ascends the social ladder. By contrast, Lorna Kelly (Elise Jansen) is a model of respectability and decency, a member of the Temperance Union, with whom he had a child. As he gets older, 17-year-old Ida Pender (Gracie Gilbert) enters the scene, a young, sexy and modern woman who is drawn to Taylor's celebrity.

"They all represent an image," says Daperis, who was surprised to discover when researching the role that Taylor preceded America's Al Capone and that years before US Prohibition, criminals and crooked coppers ran the sly grog shops and gambling dens that proliferated in Melbourne in the early 1900s. Jury fixing was rampant.

The eight-hour drama was filmed in a punishing 12 weeks, in some cases on actual inner-city locations where Squizzy and his gang operated.

"We were on location at a house where there were three bullet holes and the owner said they were Squizzy Taylor's," Daperis says. "There are many accounts of that. He's an iconic Melbourne figure."

Set between 1915 and 1927, there are inevitable comparisons between *Underbelly: Squizzy* and 2011's *Underbelly: Razor*, in which Squizzy (played by Justin Rosniak) briefly appears. The other "crossover" character is the unhinged, trigger-happy and violent John "Snowy" Cutmore (played in both series by Matt Boesenberg), who is part of Squizzy's gang before a falling-out that would have fatal consequences.

Albert "Tankbuster" McDonald, played by Luke Ford, was one of the few people who called Taylor by his proper name, Les. The pair grew up together in detention, became pickpockets and loyal friends, until "Tank" decides to enlist in World War I, returning, as many did, a damaged man.

In many ways "Tank" represents the conscience of *Underbelly: Squizzy*, from his reasons for signing up for military service and the sobering lessons of war, to his parting-of-ways with Squizzy.

"He has a good heart," Ford says. "I think his purpose with Les was to have a better life and that's why he left; he realised that Squizzy is not going down that path."

"I wanted to make him part of the heart of the show. I don't want to sound too arrogant, but Jared's performance is quite intense and brutal. I think you need to have the audience keep watching in a way of 'how do I relate to this?' I thought there was a sense of survival, but also a heart that Tank could bring to keep people connected."

The mythology surrounding Squizzy Taylor is often couched in terms of class warfare, but Ford does not believe that is an essential element of *Underbelly: Squizzy*.

"It's an Aussie-battler story in some ways. His ingenuity, the scams he came up with, the way he ripped off people was quite fascinating... He had an ingenuity. But he also lost his way, which was his downfall; he became his own biggest fan."

***Underbelly: Squizzy* starts Sunday, July 28, at 8.30pm on Channel Nine.**

Advertisement

In the market for a car?

5.9 %
p.a.
for 2 years
flexible personal loan

\$0
annual fee.

Rethink banking.

Conditions apply

[Find out more](#)

citibank