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Being a star

Outrageous Fortune
ends soon but we'll
still be seeing a lot of
Antony Starr

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CRACKING YARN

Robbie Coltrane
returns to TV

WIN

50 Years of
Coronation Street
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Cover story

Moving on

He's best known for *Outrageous Fortune* but Antony Starr hopes to bust preconceptions with new projects. By Sarah Lang.

FAMILY MAN: Antony Starr with *After The Waterfall* colleagues Sally Stockwell, left, and Georgia Wightman.

AHINT of a blush colours Antony Starr's face when I mention his well-deserved trophies for best actor and TV's sexiest man.

"To a certain extent it's flattering, but you can't put too much weight on it," he says of his sex-symbol status, distinctly awkward and a little abrupt for the first time during our interview at a Ponsonby cafe, where two ladies who lunch are trying (and failing) not to stare. It's not just *Outrageous Fortune* viewers whose pulses race when they see him.

The spotlight-shy Starr remains tight-lipped about adulation from female fans. One set up a Facebook page called "Antony Starr Rocks" ("For all of us who think he is wicked, would love to hang out with him, and have his babies"). Another baked a ginormous *OF* cake complete with a bed, figurines, Van's chain, tools and a Tool Guys van, and hand-delivered it to the set. He didn't know until now that it was especially for his birthday. "Really? That's more effort than anyone's ever gone to for my birthday!"

He lets slip that he has a partner, but no more probing, please. He's here to promote his latest projects, not his personal life. "I keep myself to myself pretty much. I'm not someone who gallivants around town looking for attention."

That's not to say he's anything but a model interviewee. Grounded and genial, articulate and cerebral, confident but in no way arrogant, this self-confessed geek takes his work seriously but not himself, as those who saw his hilarious cameo on *The Jaquie Brown Diaries* will know. He pauses to consider each question, not thinking of the most PC thing to say but the best way to say what he thinks. A bit of a philosopher at 34, he's nothing like the twins he plays on *Outrageous* – gormless stoner Van and ruthless cynic Jethro.

The final season is still screening – only three episodes to go – but filming wrapped in February, so *Outrageous Fortune* is long gone for Starr. And yes, it was time to call it quits. "Inevitably any series that goes on too long will reach a point where it starts struggling for ideas, so I've always been really aware of getting out while the going's good. I don't really want to be associated with something that you put your

heart, your soul, your energy, your love into – and everyone loves what you've done – and suddenly it flips and they turn on you ... It's the last thing you want to happen. So I think it'll go out as it should. On a high."

After six seasons in the Wests' bosom, Starr has relished playing against type in recent projects. In upcoming TV One telefeature *Spies and Lies*, he plays charming conman Syd Ross who, in a little-known true story, pulled off the cheekiest of hoaxes in New Zealand history. In 1942, the government swallowed the ex-jailbird's tall tale about a Nazi plot to take over New Zealand. "He said there was a Nazi spy ring and he could infiltrate it if they gave him wads of cash and a really nice car," says Starr. Sending him to "spy central" Rotorua, the state effectively paid Ross to impersonate a captain, drink beer, stay at a flash hotel and romance a local lady while gathering "intelligence" for a paranoid major (played by Scottish actor John Sessions). Eventually, of course, the jig was up. "The whole fiasco made the government look so inept that they basically just hushed it up."

The part was a bit of fun after filming a heavy role in local drama *After the Waterfall*, which pulled full houses at the New Zealand International Film Festival. It will be released nationwide on November 4. In his first film lead, Starr plays John, a park ranger whose world and relationships collapse after the disappearance of his 4-year-old daughter, Pearl.

Watching the first few scenes, it's hard not to see Starr as Van or Jethro. "Yeah, I've got to get over the block around that. People do pigeonhole, so this film will remind the public there's more, not just to me – to any actor – than just one part." Indeed, 10 minutes in and you're only seeing John in a subtle but gut-wrenching portrayal of a grieving father stuck in a hellish limbo. "The film's a testament to the strength of the human spirit. How do you survive? How do you get through? How do you move forward? How do you live again without that eating you day and night?"

All were meaty questions that appealed to Starr. As did the question of why men (particularly Kiwi blokes) find it harder than women to express themselves and emotionally support each other – like John and his father, who inhabit separate bubbles in the same house. "Rather than tying everything up and putting a little ribbon on it, the film asks questions. It makes [the viewer] ask the question, makes you judge, and then examine your own judgment. I think that's one of the most important things films can do, and it's why I steer clear of popcorn films. I'm not really attracted to big, glossy, high-budget, style-over-content, meaningless shit."

During the film's genesis in 2004 – when *Outrageous Fortune* had not yet premiered and Starr was a lesser-known supporting actor – he couldn't understand why he scored the lead.

But award-winning writer/director Simone Horrocks knows why. "It was obvious that Antony had potential and x-factor to burn and, after meeting him once, we never looked at anyone else. As an actor, and as a person, Antony is generous, intuitive and demanding, both of the material, and of himself. Antony brought passion and dignity to a role that required him to take a

deep dive into some very dark emotions then lead us back towards the light. The depth of his commitment raised the bar for everyone, myself included."

He wasn't involved just from action through to cut but swapped ideas and drafts with Horrocks over a five-year "slow burn". You could almost call him a creative consultant; Horrocks calls him a key collaborator.

"Collaboration is the best way to work. It's only way to work really," Starr says. "Everyone's there because they have a set of skills to offer across the board."

To get into John's headspace, Starr drew on the bond with his four nieces, and immersed himself in research about coping with a missing child. He admits he put a lot of pressure on himself to nail it.

"The pressure wasn't so much my ego – it was from dealing with very sensitive material. Missing kids. Unfortunately, it's much more common than you'd think."

It's not just the trickle of cases you see on the news: around 4000 children under 18 are reported missing each year. "During filming I kept thinking 'people who have lost kids will be watching this' and thank God some of the feedback from them has been really positive.

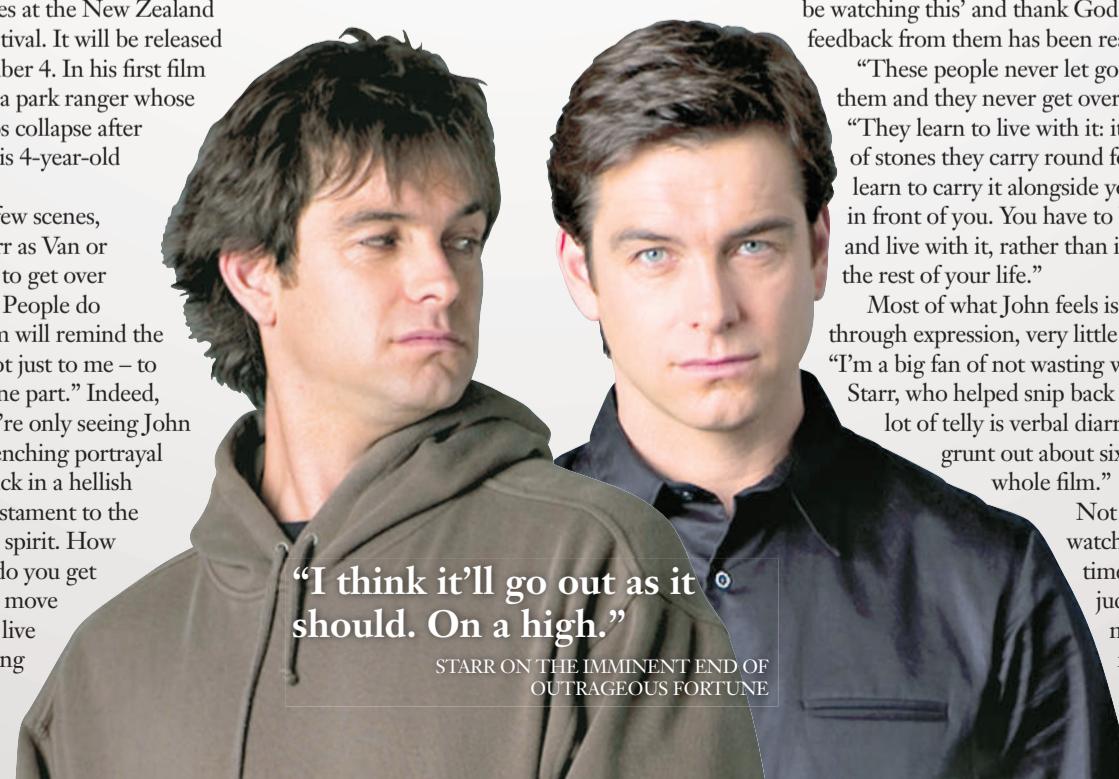
"These people never let go. It stays with them and they never get over it," says Starr. "They learn to live with it: it's the backpack of stones they carry round forever, but you learn to carry it alongside you as opposed to in front of you. You have to be able to live, and live with it, rather than it screwing up the rest of your life."

Most of what John feels is conveyed through expression, very little through words. "I'm a big fan of not wasting words," says Starr, who helped snip back the dialogue. "A lot of telly is verbal diarrhoea. I think I grunt out about six words in the whole film."

Not that he watched it for some time. "I get quite judgmental of myself, so I put it off for quite a while. Because

"I think it'll go out as it should. On a high."

STARR ON THE IMMINENT END OF OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE



On TV

Another cracking good yarn

Robbie Coltrane is solving crime again, this time as a troubled detective in tonight's *Murderland*. By Mark Brown.

ROBIE COLTRANE is at the top of his game. In an acting career that has spanned three decades – taking him from the inspired mayhem of the *Comic Strip* films in the early 80s, to his role as children's literature icon Hagrid in the *Harry Potter* films – he has earned a reputation as one of the most versatile actors on the screen, not to mention an OBE.

In *Murderland*, a new TV One thriller by David Pirie, 59-year-old Coltrane plays Hain, a troubled detective who finds himself far more intimately involved in the case of a murdered woman than he would like. Wrestling with personal demons of both the alcoholic and sexual varieties, Hain is, Coltrane says, very distinct from Fitz, the criminal psychologist in the actor's award-winning television series *Cracker*.

"You can't compare Hain with Fitz," he insists. "Firstly, *Murderland* isn't about police procedure and, secondly, Hain isn't a psychologist. What you're talking about is a man who just happens to be a policeman. The interesting thing about Hain is that he's not a very interesting character. He's not fabulously clever. He's not a great policeman. He's not hugely charismatic. I'd describe him as a kind-of Chekhovian character. He's an ordinary bloke, to whom extraordinary things have happened. Which is quite hard to play, I have to say."

Told from the perspectives of Sally, the murder victim, Carrie, her daughter, and Hain – the drama covers 15 years, moving back and forth between the present day and the early 90s.

Hain and *Murderland* may be very different propositions from Fitz and *Cracker*, but the very fact that Coltrane is playing another role that involves investigating crime will excite fans of the smash-hit 90s series. The bad news for *Cracker* fans is that the 2006 two-part special was, Coltrane says, absolutely the last appearance of Fitz.

Some say neither the show nor Coltrane received quite the recognition they deserved. Coltrane is sanguine, however. "Twenty-eight major awards. I got three Baftas. I'm not bitching."

As well as a string of accolades, *Cracker* also spawned an American version, in which the action was transplanted to Los Angeles. Was Coltrane ever offered a big-money contract to make a series in the States, as happened to his friend Hugh Laurie, star of *House*? "I was offered a job in America just at the end of the final series of *Cracker* [in 1995]. My daughter, Alice, was



LINKED: Lucy Cohu as victim, Robbie Coltrane as detective, and Sharon Small as child psychologist in *Murderland*.

just 2 months old, and they wanted five years' commitment. I just didn't want my children to be brought up in America, really."

Coltrane won't, or can't, divulge the nature of the American work he has turned down, but he confesses another, artistic, reason for refusing. "They work their asses off [on American television drama series]. They do 22 episodes a year, and you know that you're not going to approve of at least 18 of them."

House, he believes, is an exception to the rule. "Hugh's been very lucky. *House* has been terrific. Although I don't think it would have happened without *Cracker*. That kind of misanthropic central character, you would never see in American television. A central character who is essentially rude, unpleasant and has huge problems."

Coltrane worked with Laurie on the *Blackadder* series in the 90s, memorably playing an irascible Dr Johnson opposite Laurie's stupid and foppish Prince of Wales. Coltrane is delighted, he says, by the success of *House*. "It's so nice to see Hugh doing it. He was always

hugely underrated as an actor."

Although Coltrane is at least as famous for his big-screen roles (most notably Hagrid, of course) as for his characters on television, he feels happier making television dramas.

"Nowadays the big Hollywood studios only make about three movies a year, and they cost about \$200 million each. There's no room for error in that, and not a lot of room, I would think, for free expression."

He admits, too, to a surprising financial reason for preferring television to film. "There's also the question of the money. If you've got a huge Hollywood star in your film, they're getting \$32 million, and everyone else gets their bus fare."

Coltrane, though, is unlikely to be working for his bus fare any time soon. Whether he's playing the lovable hero Hagrid, or Hain, an altogether more complex kind of hero, the Scottish actor continues to be in high demand.

The Sunday Telegraph

Murderland plays on TV One at 8.30 tonight.

Film festival

India on show

A WEEK-LONG Indian film festival is coming soon to Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. *Yes India*, which kicks off in Auckland on Thursday during Diwali celebrations, gives Kiwis a rich experience of Indian culture and its diversity. It will showcase 16 feature films, two documentaries and 10 short films.

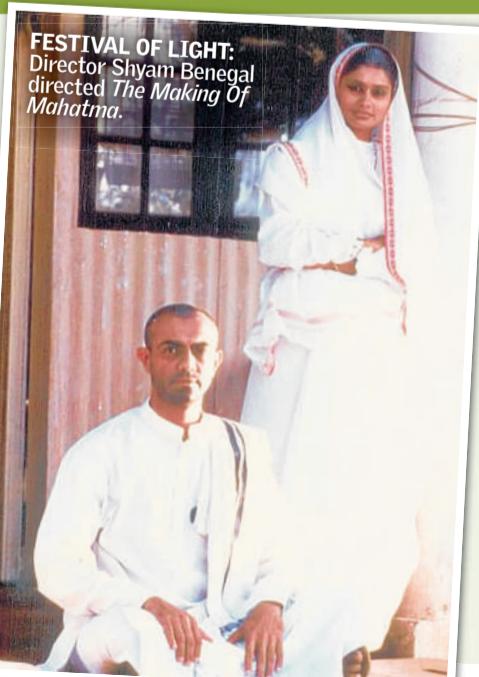
Wellington-based festival director Ravi Kambhoj says he has long thought there was a desire for Indian arthouse movies in New Zealand and has spent several years bringing the festival to fruition. He is particularly excited about the festival's opening-night feature *The Making Of Mahatma* by director Shyam

Benegal, who was nominated for the Palme D'Or at Cannes. The untold story of Mahatma Gandhi's early life in South Africa has proved controversial but "it's a strong film and I think it's going to enlighten people", Kambhoj says.

Other highlights include *The White Elephant* and *Road To Sangam*.

Kambhoj said *Yes India* will become an annual event for New Zealand; he is also taking the festival to Australia in April/May next year.

Yes India screens at Rialto cinemas from October 28-November 3. It runs in Wellington November 4-10, and Christchurch from November 24-30. Go to www.yesindiafilmfestival.org for more info.



we had such a short time to film it – five weeks – the temptation and the trap is to sit there and hammer yourself: 'I should have done this and that'. I don't know any people that like watching themselves. I prefer not to."

The process took its toll, and not just because John's beard three years on meant the scenes were shot in reverse order. "Being around that study of missing kids and broken families, people being lost and destroyed emotionally – it's pretty grim territory. You're constantly thinking about it. It was only afterwards that you actually look back and go 'aw, that was kind of excruciating'."

He burned himself out by sandwiching filming of *Waterfall* and *Spies And Lies* in the gap between seasons five and six of *Outrageous Fortune*. "It wasn't 'til well after that that the cracks started showing and I deflated a bit."

Re-energised now, he's been "sniffing round overseas" for work. This month, he slipped to the States, though he's staying mum on any specifics. "I don't have my crystal ball on me today. Na, I like not knowing, not trying to forecast it too much, 'cause there's that saying: 'How do you make God laugh? Tell him your plans.' I'm just trying to keep my little self to myself."

After The Waterfall is in cinemas from November 4. *Spies And Lies* is scheduled for TV One mid-November. The final episode of *Outrageous Fortune* airs on TV3 November 9.

Giveaway

WE HAVE five double passes to give away to *After The Waterfall*.

To be in the draw, email your name, address and phone details to: view@heraldonsunday.co.nz (with *After* in the subject line). Or put the same details on the back of an envelope and send to: *After The Waterfall* Giveaway, View magazine, Herald on Sunday, PO Box 3290, Auckland.

Entries close at 1pm on Thursday, October 28. Winners' names published October 31.