

## MOVIES

# The edge of Everest

Chad Moffit speaks to Sarah Lang about playing Sir Ed.

Chad Moffit is nervous. Our chat is his first face-to-face interview about his first feature film. He knows playing Sir Edmund Hillary in docudrama *Beyond the Edge* — the first big-screen re-telling of the first triumphant ascent of Mt Everest — is the chance of a lifetime. As a windstorm rages outside, Moffit warms up a little over Earl Grey at the Roxy Cinema in Miramar, Wellington, near Weta Digital where he works as a computer animator.

Tall and lanky with a craggy face, Moffit bears a striking resemblance to the young Ed. So, during the nationwide hunt for a leading man who looked like Hillary, Moffit sent director Leanne Pooley a photo of himself holding the \$5 note which bears Sir Ed's image. The ploy earned him an audition. "I was really nervous. I didn't know much about the movie, and wanted to be over-prepared rather than underprepared, so I researched Sir Ed, particularly how he walked and talked." The phonecall confirming he'd got the part felt like "an early Christmas present".

Moffit, who had done rock climbing but no alpine climbing, spent nearly a month filming on Mt Cook, the film's Mt Everest. Though he had a stunt double,

Moffit did everything that was safe, including climbing a horizontal ladder over a yawning crevasse. "It was really scary. My mind knew I was safe but my body didn't." Filming gave him a new appreciation for just how difficult, dangerous and potentially deadly the 1953 expedition was.

*Beyond the Edge*, which seamlessly blends documentary with drama, uses archival interviews (with Hillary and others) as voiceover for the dramatised scenes. So Moffit is, effectively, a silent-movie actor whose expression and body language does the talking for him — and he captures Sir Ed's understated personality and physicality well. "Sir Ed was a very shy dude but he wasn't awkward or tense when climbing."

Although Moffit is a few years older than Hillary was in 1953, he doesn't look as weather-beaten. So, before close-ups, make-up artists used prosthetics to age him around his eyes and forehead, to lengthen his teeth, and sometimes to add a beard and stubble. "It's all quite subtle," says Moffit, who has seen some rough cuts of his scenes, but hasn't seen the final film yet. "I can't wait for the premiere at the Embassy [Theatre] on Tuesday."

Currently Moffit is working long

hours on the second *Hobbit* film at Weta, but film isn't just his day job. "I'm a closet filmmaker, mainly helping out on short films. I enjoy writing, assistant directing, being an extra, helping with lighting, whatever needs doing. For this film, it was weird not helping out behind the camera."

Also a trained hypnotherapist, Moffit isn't pursuing a career in acting, but is open to interesting roles. "Acting can be really rewarding — you get to explore different parts of what makes us human. But for me it's all about learning. I try to grab opportunities and experiences when they come along."

*Beyond the Edge* 3D opens nationwide on Thursday.



Chad Moffit as Sir Edmund Hillary.

## TV PREVIEW

## Heading back to Downton

The audience are hungry for answers this season, writes Sarah Lang.



*Downton Abbey*, the period drama that needs no introduction, is my comfort food. It reminds me of the roast dinners of my childhood: warm, familiar and never rushed. The fourth season of the British hit premieres on Prime tomorrow night, and I'm curious to see where the show will go now that it is back on form.

After the soap-opera histrionics of its second series — imposter heirs and paralysed soldiers leaping to their feet — critics scolded the show like Carson (Jim Carter) scolds his footmen. But in Series Three *Downton* returned to what it does best: character-led drama, drawing-room comedy and social commentary that highlight the bonds and the divides between upstairs and downstairs in a rapidly changing world.

The third season centred on the choice between adaptation or extinction in an England forever altered by war. Even "poor old Edith"



Michelle Dockery and Allen Leech in *Downton Abbey*.

(Laura Carmichael) began to have her say and do things her way, while Robert (Hugh Bonneville) stubbornly clung to the past, taking every call for change as a personal insult. Then again, stuffy old Robert wasn't fazed by Thomas (Rob James-Collier) being gay, while the gruffly likable Carson had a homophobic rant. Did anyone else feel sorry for Thomas for

a nanosecond?

In the series finale, the family holidayed in Scotland, where Edith's editor Gregson (Charles Edwards) just happened to be in the neighbourhood, and Robert found a new appreciation for his marriage — and for Matthew's (Dan Stevens) efforts to modernise the estate. Returning home early,

Mary (Michelle Dockery) gave birth to George, heir to Downton. But one can't end a season on such a happy note, can one? Just after meeting his son in the Christmas special Matthew dies in a car crash. I thought Sybil (Jessica Brown Findlay) dying was enough young life lost for one season, but Stevens quit and the writers reportedly couldn't bear to break up their golden couple.

The fourth series picks up in 1922, six months after Matthew's death. I won't give too much away, but the first episode is a cracker. It opens with an unidentified woman sneaking out of Downton in the small hours, and focuses on the grief over Matthew's death. The death of her only child has broken Isobel (Penelope Wilton), and we can read Mary's pain in her eyes. As Mary's family tries to help her, the Dowager Countess (Dame Maggie Smith) foregoes her usual barbed quips and raised eyebrows to speak from the heart — something that is all the more powerful for being so rare.

Gosh, Maggie Smith is good.

Injecting some glamour and optimism are scenes set among the London literati, as Edith meets with Gregson. Who would have thought the plain, overlooked sister jilted at the altar would become a modern career woman with self-confidence, style and an admirer?

Expect the spotlight to be firmly fixed on social change amid the new freedoms of the Roaring Twenties. How far will Edith go for love? Will Mary find meaning in life again? What mischief will cousin Rose get up to? Will Tom stay or go? Has Thomas reformed? Will the maids and footmen ever unravel their love quadrangle? Will Mrs Patmore master the electric beater? And why does Kiri Te Kanawa randomly pop up playing a famous soprano? I'm trying to avoid reading spoilers, so my appetite for *Downton* is definitely back.

*Downton Abbey's* fourth season premieres 8.35pm tomorrow on Prime.