



# in the director's chair

It took Katie Wolfe 12 months to shoot a 12-minute movie. Now the actor-turned-director's little film is making her big news across the globe

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**YOU MIGHT KNOW KATIE WOLFE** from her roles on-camera, but she's increasingly making a name for herself behind the camera – in fact her short-film directorial debut *This is Her* was selected for January's 25th Sundance Film Festival in Utah, America, one of the most acclaimed cinema showcases in the world.

Although an overseas flight and a short-film funding deadline are looming, Katie appears remarkably relaxed for our interview. With the kind of eager enthusiasm usually shrugged off after childhood, she often ends sentences with exclamation marks and occasionally, "Hooray!"

From anyone else it could sound forced or false, but not from Katie, who admits she's known for having "a bit of a hop, skip and a jump in me".

But while she acts – and looks – much younger than her 40 years ("People often don't expect someone of this age to be this small!"), she has two decades as an actor, director and producer



**RIGHT (From left):** Katie's acting roles included Dr Bridget Hastings in *Shortland Street*; estranged wife Amanda Masefield in *Mercy Peak* and feisty part-Maori Ginny Gannaway in *Marlin Bay*. **Far right:** Nowadays Katie's directing the actors. This is the cast of TV2's *Go Girls*, her most recent TV project.

## ONCE I HIT THAT THIRD LINE, 'THIS IS THE BITCH WHO'LL ONE DAY STEAL MY HUSBAND AND RUIN MY LIFE,' THE SCRIPT JUST CARRIED ME ALONG WITH ITS BLACK HUMOUR

in TV, theatre and film under her belt. She is still most closely linked with her small screen characters: Bridget in *Shortland Street*, dry-witted reporter Amanda on *Coverstory*, and the "other Amanda" on *Mercy Peak*.

"But as an actor I was always a little bit frustrated," says Katie, "asking questions it wasn't my job to ask. As a director I can mould the story and set the tone."

Her most recent directorial effort is new TV2 dramedy *Go Girls*, about the loves, friendships and ambitions of three young women, which starts airing this month.

And she is rightfully proud of *This Is Her*, a black comedy set in suburban Auckland. While Evie breathes through labour pains with doting husband Jonathan at her side, her older self's wry commentary takes us across town, where six-year-old Kylie, who'll grow up and nab Evie's husband, is playing with her dolls.

Written by Katie's friend, Kate McDermott, the wry script immediately appealed. "Once I hit that third line, 'This is the bitch who'll one day steal my husband and ruin my life,' the script just carried me along with

its black humour." There's a lot of skin and plastic in Katie's trademark imaginative visuals (the opening birth scene is artfully shot to look like a sex scene), which powerfully juxtapose the happy marriage and nascent life with the angelic-looking little girl.

The 12 months of hard yakka it took to yield the 12-minute film have certainly paid dividends. After winning the best short film award at the New Zealand International Film Festival, *This Is Her* was nominated in all four short-film categories in last year's Qantas Film and Television Awards, winning one.

As well as screening at Sundance in Utah as we go to press, it's also lit up the big screen at the Edinburgh International Film Festival and Melbourne International Film Festival, where Katie was selected for the emerging directors' workshop, Accelerator. And in recent months Katie has jetted off to see *This Is Her* screen in coveted spots at the Telluride Film Festival, the New York Film Festival and the Prague International Short Film Festival, where it won the Audience Award.

One reason the film has been so popular, Katie reckons, is it's a peep into the romantic myth of happy ever after. "The romantic ideal is very powerful, and for me the film was a chance to explore why, when we know that marriages and relationships crumble all the time, do we still rush into them and believe in forever?"

But then again, she rushed into wedded bliss with actor-turned-writer husband Tim Balme. After falling in love while playing brother and sister on the set of the 1993 film *The Last Tattoo*, the couple were married within six months.

"When I look back on it now, that was a very heady thing to do – Christ, I was only 24 – and a lot of people

And there are plenty of projects vying for attention. As well as planning another short film, she's developing ideas for the next logical step: Her first feature film. "I do feel confident that a film career will happen," she says. "Seeing This Is Her received really well around the world I've realised, 'Hey, I'm really a filmmaker now!'"

But as film projects eat up a lot of time and aren't exactly lucrative, it's not surprising she's got plenty of other pots on the boil at any one time. "Six!" she trills, counting them on her hands. Close to her heart is the "luxury" of theatre directing. Her most recent production was *The Case of Katherine Mansfield* in 2007, and you might remember *The Women*, for which she was named Director



must have been quite sceptical." But coming from "middle New Zealand" families with happily married parents, wedlock was something they both wanted. "And we have a very happy, robust marriage, I think because we don't take anything for granted; we've made our own rules and we have a relationship built on equality."

Certainly, equality's the operative word when it comes to sharing care of the kids. Not having nine-to-five jobs (Tim's currently penning *Outrageous Fortune* scripts) means either Tim or Katie can keep an eye on the kids while working from home, and a part-time nanny helps out when they both have to go out to work.

Even as she chats to me about balancing her directing work with motherhood, she's cajoling three-year-old son Nikau, who's tired of watching TV with the sound down, to stop clambering up her legs.

The fair-featured tot looks nothing like either Katie or Tim, but seven-year-old daughter Edie – who's grinning down at us from a framed photo – could be a carbon copy of her mum. "Yeah, we're like Dolly the Sheep clones!" laughs Katie.

When she hands over the childcare reins, Katie often escapes to her off-site office, a shed out the back of a friend's Sandringham business which physically and mentally separates home and family from work.

of the Year at the 2005 Chapman Tripp Theatre Awards.

But because they're works that progress at turtle-pace and don't exactly pay well, Katie limits theatre productions to one every two years. She has in development a production based on James K Baxter's tome *Jerusalem Daybook* and two other projects for the New Zealand International Festival of the Arts in 2010.

The fluent te reo speaker also directs shows for Maori Television. Getting in touch with her Maori roots – the Taranaki girl is part Ngati Tama/Ngati Mutunga – has become a priority in recent years.

After years of night-school classes, a full Maori-language immersion year at Epsom's Wananga Taki Ura in 2007 gave her that "final push" to attain fluency. "Because so much tikanga [Maori custom] is involved in te reo, it was a way to strengthen my Maori identity, and I've fallen in love with the language," says Katie.

And she's still just as in love with her industry, which she plans to work in "forever". While there have been setbacks, if anyone can stay positive it's Katie.

"Sometimes you feel like you're trying to prove yourself over and over," she says, "and there are times when you doubt yourself, but occasionally something really works and you take a lot of heart from that and ride it for all you can." Right now, it's one helluva ride. ▀