

Weekend

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Playing Sir Edmund Hillary

Hillary, the man

Sir Ed's life before and after Everest is the focus of a new drama, writes **Sarah Lang**

Playing Sir Edmund Hillary in a mini-series would be a big deal for any New Zealand actor. But for Andrew Munro — whose handful of screen credits include “Film School Tutor” in the movie *My Wedding & Other Secrets* and “Guard Arthur” in the tele-feature *Field Punishment No. 1* — it's a really big deal. It's his first lead. It's his big break.

And it's a long way from his days playing in Dunedin punk band The Yams, working as a chef in Parliament, and doing odd jobs in the TV and film industry, before moving to Auckland in 2005 to give acting a real crack. Now it's paid off.

Hillary's story has been told before — in books, a documentary, a feature film — but never a drama series. Funded with nearly \$6.5 million from NZ On Air's Platinum Fund, the Great Southern Television production was filmed largely in Auckland, the Southern Alps and Nepal between January and April last year. The series' creator, writer and executive producer, Tom Scott, based *Hillary* on his biography of his friend — and on hundreds of hours of interviews about Hillary's most public and private moments.

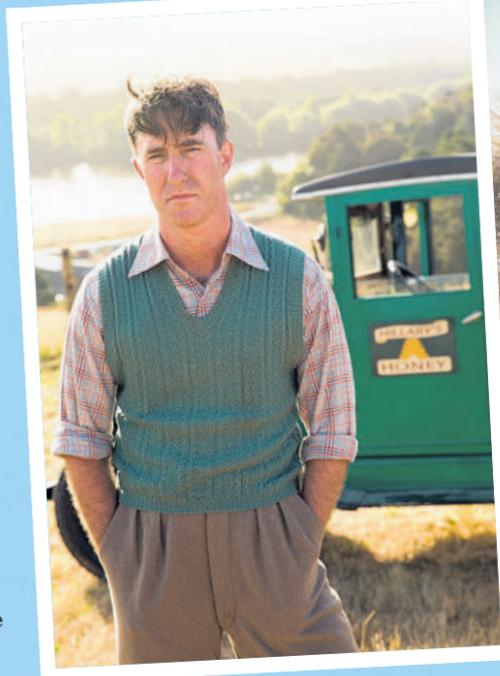
Six hour-long episodes give the series the scope to be more than just the edited highlights — and to focus on the man, not just the climber. It covers everything from Hillary meeting his first wife Louise (Amy Usherwood) to defying his pacifist family to go to war, and his struggle to cope with stardom. Only one episode is about the Everest ascent. “We all know he climbed

mountains,” Munro says, “but this is an insight into the man himself”. Child actors play Hillary aged 11 and 16, but Munro gets by far the most screentime, playing Hillary from his early 20s to late 50s, with a little help from the makeup department.

When Munro auditioned, he was going for the part of George Lowe, Hillary's longtime friend and climbing companion. He had never entertained the idea of playing Hillary, but was called back to audition for it. “I waited nervously by the phone. I really, really wanted this job. When I got the call, I felt exhilarated and terrified. It's such a privilege to get to tell his story, but it was also daunting because the man is so special to New Zealand.”

It didn't hurt that Munro had worked with *Hillary* director Danny Mulheron on the telefeature *The Kick* (playing All Black Stephen Donald's mate Dougie). Nor did it hurt that he has Hillary's long face and patrician nose. “The actor had to have a resemblance,” says producer Carmen Leonard, “but more importantly had to have the acting ability. Fortunately for us, Andrew has both, and his portrayal of Ed is absolutely stunning.” Munro's prep included talking to Hillary's daughter Sarah. “She showed us some photos and videos and I read a bunch of his letters to Louise.” When they were flying to India for filming, Munro ran into Hillary's son Peter at the airport. They chatted as they walked. “He was interested in how it was coming together and how I felt about it.”

Initially, Munro didn't know much about Hillary, apart from his ascent of Everest and his humanitarian work in Nepal. He also didn't know how central George Lowe was to Hillary's life. Nor did Dean O'Gorman, who plays Lowe. “I read Lowe's book and talked to Tom Scott, who knew George,” O'Gorman says. “George



Andrew Munro, who plays Sir Edmund Hillary in the mini-series, is afraid of heights.

was quite humorous and light-hearted, whereas Hillary was more serious.”

So is this series something of a bromance? “Absolutely,” Munro says. “They were equals as climbers, with some friendly competition. They respected each other immensely. They could say anything to each other. They were in incredibly dangerous situations together.”

Recreating those dangerous situations took pluck, especially as Munro is scared of heights. “On the first day in the Southern Alps, Dean and I were helicoptered to the top of Mt Elie de Beaumont, 10,000 feet [3050 metres] up. You can't wear crampons in a helicopter, so we're wearing boots without much grip, standing on the edge of a giant drop. One slip and you're off the edge.”

Something even scarier happened the day they finished filming and were in India, preparing to fly home. It was April 25, 2015: the day an earthquake killed nearly 9000 people, injured nearly 22,000, and left 3.5 million homeless. “I hid in the bathroom doorway and watched the room spin,” Munro remembers. “When we realised Nepal had been hit, it rattled everyone. We'd worked with lots of people there, like our fixer and translator.” They quickly found out those people were fine. “But we'd met locals in alleyways and temples and I wondered what happened to them. There was no way of knowing.”

During the 16-month lag between filming and screening, Munro has yo-yoed between putting the series out of his mind and getting really excited about it. Recently he and O'Gorman watched the episodes together. “I'm always been a bit funny about watching stuff I've done,” Munro says. “Could I have done something differently? But then I sank into the story. I'm incredibly proud of it.”

Lowdown

Hillary, a six-part mini-series, premieres on Sunday, August 21, 8.30pm, on TV One

