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OUTRAGEOUS  
fans

and their wacky world

## Cover story

**CLOSE TO HOME:**  
Jessica Browne  
outside the West's  
famous home.  
DOUG SHERRING

# Hopelessly devoted

With *Outrageous Fortune* soon to return for its final season, Sarah Lang talks to some die-hard fans.

**I**T IS being billed as the biggest cliffhanger in the history of New Zealand television. When the credits rolled on season five of smash-hit show *Outrageous Fortune* in October, Cheryl (Robyn Malcolm) had just stabbed Detective Gerard (Charles Mesure) in the neck with a bottle. She was trying to defend her daughter Pascalle (Siobhan Marshall), not trying to seriously injure the cop with a vendetta against her family. But as what looked like Gerard's lifeblood sapped away, he fired three bullets in the direction of Cheryl and Pascalle, his ex.

Half an hour after the episode aired, *Outrageous Fortune* climbed to the No. 1 global spot on social-networking site Twitter's trending list, making it the world's most tweeted subject at the time, and luring new converts. Now everyone is left wondering: Who dies? Who goes to jail? Can they kill off Cheryl?

The wait is just about over. After TV3 replays the cliffhanger this Saturday, there's only three sleeps until the premiere of the sixth and final season. No spoilers here – but nothing can silence the speculation. A TV3 website competition for the most original answer to “what happens next” is going strong, as are the predictions on official website [www.outrageousfortune.co.nz](http://www.outrageousfortune.co.nz). This week, Gerard was top of the pops in its poll ‘Who's Dead Then?’. Desperate for Cheryl to survive, many fans think her fate is prison rather than death, and that Pascalle may be injured, even disfigured. More out-there theories are a 15-year flashforward, or Cheryl influencing her kids from the grave, a la *Six Feet Under*.

Much has been said about the appeal of our longest-running, most-decorated drama. *Outrageous Fortune* has inspired levels of devotion unseen before in New Zealand television. It manifests on the website, where viewers from around the country and the globe surf photos, promos, polls, competitions, blogs, episode recaps, merchandise, computer wallpapers, actor profiles, and indulge in countless discussion threads. You can spend hours in there. And people do. When the show's on, website traffic peaks at 100,000 unique visits a month.

These self-confessed addicts don't just incessantly check the website, rewatch

the DVDs, and buy all the merchandise (soundtracks, the book, t-shirts). They also stalk Facebook fan pages, re-type press interviews onto the site, make compilation videos and load them on YouTube – and that's just for starters. Who are these die-hard fans?

One woman in line for the title of *Outrageous Fortune's* biggest fan is 22-year-old Jessica Browne. The client service administrator for the Henderson, West Auckland branch of an in-home-childcare company didn't get hooked until season three, when Aurora (Claire Chitham) died. “I was like ohmigod what have I been missing?” she says. She caught up via DVD. “Now I will never miss an episode. Everyone knows no one's allowed to invite me out on a Tuesday night or call me while it's on. I will not answer the phone, I will not text, nothing. I zone

**“Everyone knows no one's allowed to invite me out on a Tuesday night or call me while it's on. I will not answer the phone, I will not text.”**

JESSICA BROWNE

out – it's just me and the TV.”

But that's not why it'd be hard to one-up her in the fan stakes. It's because she baked the cast a cake. And not just any cake. The chocolate-mud cake with milky-bar icing in the middle and chocolate truffle on the outside was a colossal creation – and a very personalised one. The top of three layers was a heart-shaped, leopardskin-fringed “bed” with a figurine of Cheryl laying on it and Judd and Wolf on either side. Figurines of the rest of the core cast, all made from fondant icing, encircled the bottom, right down to the last details like Van's chain, miniature tools and the Tool Guys van. After it was finished, Browne hand-delivered it to the studio. She was disappointed that the cast were out filming, but she's been told they all saw, marvelled at and tasted it.

Although her cover story is that

she'd just completed a cake-making certificate and was practising her skills, she admits there was an ulterior motive. “It was mainly a birthday cake for Anthony Starr [who plays the West twins].” She favours his role as Van over Jethro, and has a screensaver of the shirtless star on her work computer.

Desperate to meet “the Starr” for years, she finally got her wish – by following a trail of traffic cones from the set.

“I sat in my car for ages – I could see him, he was right there. I went all shy but I thought ‘Come on, Jessica, do it. I got out and walked up there.’ Introducing herself to a set-hand as “the one who made the cake”, she asked if she could have a photo with Starr. After filming finished, he came over. “He was super-friendly. He shook my hand, looked through my cake portfolio.” And she didn't shower for a week because she didn't want to wash off his scent? “Ha! Actually he said ‘Excuse me I'm all hot and sweaty’ and I was like, ‘I don't mind. Not a problem at all!’”

“When I got back in the car I started crying,” admits Browne.

“It was absolutely the best day of my life.”

So what got *Outrageous Fortune's* “most persistent” fan addicted? “I'm a Westie but not a stereotypical Westie – I'm someone who should live in Epsom – so I find it [the show] fascinating because my life has never been rough like the Wests' life, but I'm surrounded by it. I look and it and go ‘Is that what I missed out on?’”

Occasionally, this voyeur volunteers as one of the website members who, in the ad breaks, types live updates about what's just happened. It's for the overseas fans who just can't wait for an episode to air or DVD to arrive.

One of those is Pat Ashbury, a 52-year-old Sydneysider and Ministry of Defence office manager who got “hooked” when she stumbled across the first season screening late at night. Soon she discovered the website. “On a Monday night, I'll start a thread asking for [storyline] predictions, and between Monday and Tuesday night everyone throws their two bob in. Then when it goes to air in New Zealand I stop

everything and sit at the computer, waiting for the by-the-minute updates from the fan network. It's the only night my

**BEST DAY EVER:** Anthony Starr and Jessica Browne.

## Film festival

## The martyr

Rachel Weisz plays a teacher skinned alive in the sweeping historical drama *Agora*. By Helen Barlow.

**A**LEJANDRO AMENABAR has a way of directing women in movies. After rising to fame with the Spanish-language *Open Your Eyes* starring Penelope Cruz, the Chilean-born director made *The Others* with Nicole Kidman. He then won the best foreign film Oscar for *The Sea Inside*, starring Javier Bardem, whose character surrounded himself with strong women. It was only a matter of time before Amenabar would work with the hugely talented and seemingly indomitable Rachel Weisz. The project, the historical epic *Agora*, made for €50 million (NZ\$88 million) and completely financed out of Europe, would be his most ambitious to date.

"I'd been wanting to make a movie about people rising above the circumstances of their moment in history and look up at the stars for guidance," he explains.

His idea to tell the story of the fourth century scholar Hypatia who, besides being an astronomer was also a philosopher and a brilliant mathematician, fitted the bill. It's all the more interesting because the resulting film, co-written with his usual collaborator, Mateo Gil, focuses on a woman and a time in Alexandria's history we know little about. As always, Amenabar's casting was astute.

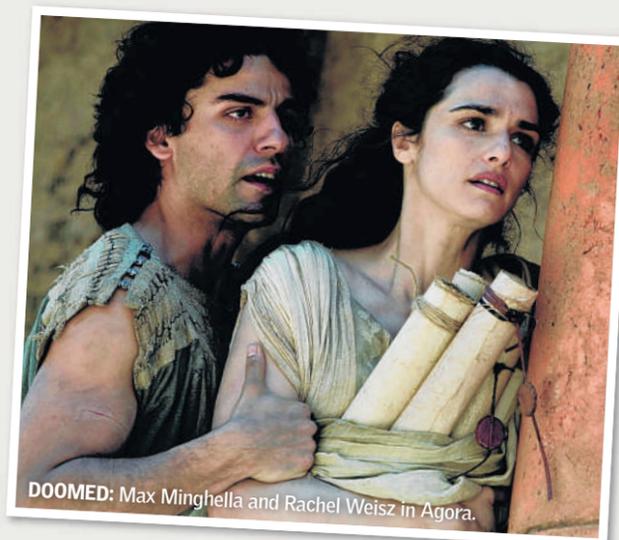
Raven-haired, majestic and possessing a fierce intelligence, the British Weisz breathes life into Hypatia who, four centuries after her death had the romantic poets writing of her virtues. Daughter of Theon, the last director of the famed Library of Alexandria, Hypatia shunned men in her quest for knowledge. Ultimately it was her scientific beliefs and her atheism which resulted in her death at the hands of the Christians. Her grisly death is one thing about which we know all the details.

"In this unusual, radical story, Hypatia was killed by fundamentalists in the most brutal way," explains Weisz, 40. "They skinned her alive with oyster shells; they splayed her bones. It's absolutely true; though it's a fantasy that a slave was in love with her as happens in the movie. We don't know that she discovered the shape of the Earth, or had worked out that the Earth moves around the sun as we show in the movie [but] we do know that she was working on conic sections, but unfortunately all of her research was lost."

Weisz threw herself into her research for the role.

"Hypatia was a great teacher, she had very devoted students, Christians and pagans, and she didn't discriminate which student she would teach in terms of their religion," Weisz says. "There are fragments of letters from her favourite students, like Synesius, whom Rupert Evans [*Hellboy*] plays. She was the kind of inspirational teacher who could transform your life. It was a true story that students fell in love with her. She gave them a handkerchief with her blood on it and I think it was her way of saying, 'Back off! I'm not interested!' It was a good way to make sure they didn't make a pass at her again."

The main contender for her affections in the movie is her student Orestes (Oscar Isaac, much better here than as King John in *Robin*



DOOMED: Max Minghella and Rachel Weisz in *Agora*.

*Hood*), who went on to become the Prefect of Alexandria. Amenabar was again astute in his casting, as Isaac, a New Yorker from a Guatemalan evangelical background, casts a strong presence in the film. Max Minghella, son of the late director Anthony Minghella, plays the slave.

"The faces were more important than the architecture," admits Amenabar, "because they had to be like the Al Fayum portraits. The level of realism is amazing, like someone had been taking pictures for us 2000 years ago. So when I first saw them, I thought, this is for real, almost everything is in ruins, almost nothing was left in Alexandria, but we have the faces. We have to stick to them as much as possible. Even the children with their shaved heads in the film ... I was obsessed with showing that in the movie because I could see it in the portraits, in the fashion."

Like *Gladiator*, *Agora* was filmed in Malta.

It was convenient for Weisz as her family could come along – and work. Her partner, director Darren Aronofsky, edited *The Wrestler* while he was there and they could spend the evenings with their son, Henry, now 4.

"It was bizarre," she recalls with a laugh. "One minute we'd be talking about 4th century Egypt and the next about Mickey Rourke and wrestling!"

Weisz has been making the most of the high profile roles – such as the grief-stricken mother in Peter Jackson's *The Lovely Bones* – that have followed her Oscar win for *The Constant Gardener* in 2006. She says, though, it wouldn't be difficult to find time to have a second child.

"I can make time to make babies. It doesn't take long, does it?" she muses.

Although she doesn't have the piece of paper she is as good as married to Aronofsky, who directed her alongside Hugh Jackman in the critically savaged *The Fountain*. Marriage is not a necessity these days, she says, even if they were both raised in good Jewish homes.

While the actress is set to re-team with Aronofsky for *Jackie*, where she will play Jackie Kennedy during the four days between her husband's assassination and his burial, Weisz is ambivalent about getting behind the camera herself.

"Maybe one day. I'd like to but I don't know if Darren would want that," she laughs. "You'd have to ask him. I'm really interested in acting. There are still so many things to do."

*Agora* screens as part of Auckland's International Film Festival, July 15, 16 and 19. For more info go to [www.nzff.co.nz](http://www.nzff.co.nz).

SWEET AS: *Outrageous Fortune* immortalised.



DEAD OR ALIVE?: Pascale (Siobhan Marshall) and Cheryl (Robyn Malcolm).



BAD GUY: Gerard (Charles Mesure).

family get dinner on time, or it's like 'sorry, we're not having dinner tonight'."

Later that night, Ashbury will log on to see the official episode recap and photos. You'd think all this would be a spoiler, but she can't resist the urge.

This hard-case grandmother is one of a legion of Aussie viewers (both natives and expat Kiwis) who make up a quarter of the Facebook page's 100,000-odd fans. "I log in every day to check what's going on or just share my thoughts," says Ashbury, who goes by the pseudonyms Peashbur and Juddlover. "At the moment we're having a competition for how many people we've converted, and how many times we've seen the DVDs." Her tally is nearly 30 times.

Why does she love the show so? "Well, it's warts-and-all. On *Desperate Housewives*

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PAT ASHBURY [AUSTRALIAN FAN]

everybody wears stilettos around the house, but we all have bad hair days. I can relate to it. Not that I'm from a criminal family! But I've had a hard life, I married a soldier who was away a lot – he'd miss birthdays and things – and I pretty much raised the kids myself. My two kids call me Cheryl."

She buys the DVDs as gifts and also lends her personal DVDs, which she orders months before release, to family and friends. But she makes sure they're returned quicksmart by attaching her business card to the cover.

This week she was checking out the "fan fiction" posted by website member Kakapo. It's a series of instalments that imagines what happens next to Cheryl and Judd.

Kakapo, a married South Islander in her 30s, was happy to talk to *View* but didn't want to be named "because some of the stuff I've written

has sexual content, which is pretty harmless. But some people could take it out of context, make a big thing of it and say 'look at this primary teacher writing pornography', which it's not." No, but there's more than a tad of Mills & Boon – and perhaps a future as a romance author or TV storyliner. "Who knows!"

So why the authorial turn? After season five's stunning ending, logging onto the website in the morning and at night wasn't enough to feed the addiction. "I kept on thinking about what would happen to Cheryl and Judd. One day I thought well, I'll write something, and put it on the website for the others." Her fellow fans begged for more, and so the story continued.

When Robyn Malcolm was down south for a fundraiser this year, Kakapo plucked up the courage to introduce herself, and her writing. Malcolm not only read and praised it, she posted it on her Facebook page. A delighted Kakapo couldn't believe it at first. "When my husband said 'oh you got a [Twitter] message from Robyn', I said 'Yeah right, you're having me on'."

Robyn Malcolm always has time for the fans. "When a show develops die-hard fans I think it's an indication of how deeply it has affected its audience," she says. "Especially in New Zealand. We are such a shy and critical bunch as a rule so to have New Zealanders expressing this degree of passion for a piece of home-grown entertainment is something I take very seriously and am very proud of. And, of course, I respect their taste enormously!"

So, what do our three fans think will happen next? Kakapo believes Cheryl will live. "I don't think the show would go on without Robyn." Ashbury thinks Pascale might be disfigured, dumped by Nicky and marry tryhard Aaron Spiller. Our cakebaker won't predict anything: "I'm always 100 per cent wrong." But though she'll be sad to see the show go, Browne reckons it'll be time. "I don't want it to drag out and become rubbish. Even great things have to come to an end."

TV3 repeats the final two episodes of *Outrageous Fortune*'s season five cliffhanger on Saturday July 10, 8.30pm. The new season premieres Tuesday July 13, at 8.30pm.