

Together at last

In honour of Valentine's Day, *Living* goes behind the scenes of a much-anticipated TV wedding. By **Sarah Lang**.

On a storybook summer's day, a 1950s Rolls Royce Silver Cloud pulls up at a wedding venue beside steps that lead to a garden glade fringed by ferns and flowers. The bride, Rachel McKenna (Angela Bloomfield), peers out of the window with an expression that could be terror, nerves or just adrenalin ahead of her wedding to long-time love Dr Chris Warner (Michael Galvin).

Rachel looks more beautiful than we've ever seen her. Through the window, we can see her subtle eye makeup, pale pink lip, and hair in a side-swept 1930s-inspired chignon. When she steps out of the car we get the full reveal — and as befits the “anti-bride”, as Bloomfield calls her, there's no froufrou here. Her elegant and sexy champagne dress has a skirt that flares slightly below the knee then drops right to the ground. As Rachel steels herself to walk down the aisle — well, the garden steps — her step-son and Chris' best man Harry (Reid Walker) runs up with some urgent news. Could there possibly be some last-minute drama?

At a *Shortland Street* wedding? Surely not.

Skulking in the bushes nearby, I'm spying on what's been dubbed the TV Wedding of the Year. It's not a Warner extravaganza on the harbour with fireworks, as Chris suggested, neither is it a registry office followed by dinner, as Rachel suggested. Rather it's a classic, elegant ceremony followed by a knees-up with their nearest and dearest.

As his screen bride arrives, Michael Galvin is sitting with his eyes closed out of shot nearby, wearing a dapper suit with his hair more perfectly coiffed than ever. Turns out he's dozing, not meditating. Any nerves? “What is there to be nervous about? I'm not actually getting married. But actually, we have a real celebrant, so if we used our own names we'd actually be married.”

Of course, this ain't Chris Warner's first time at the altar. You might think four times bitten, five times shy, but I figure marrying again is in line with Chris being a hopeless romantic. “Totally, and he's also someone who refuses to admit that he ever makes mistakes,” Galvin says wryly. “The other four marriages ended because it was the other person's fault, of course.”

Given Chris' history with Rachel, you could argue this marriage means more than his previous ones. Galvin considers this. “That's what Chris says to Rachel and she says ‘you've said that to everyone you married’ and that's true so the answer is yes and no. Rachel does seem like the perfect person for Chris to marry at this point in time, but so has everyone Chris has married at those points in time. But Rachel's definitely a good match for him: socially, professionally, intellectually.”

And wedding number five may well be Chris' last, given he's finally ditched the womanising. Or so Galvin tells me. “I think that's something he's finally got out of his system and I think that's one thing that will make this marriage last. I do think Chris won't be sleeping around on Rachel.” In a way though, he has been sleeping around while trying to impregnate Grace, right? “Yeah, he's been very clever, getting Rachel's consent.”

Galvin's needed elsewhere: it's time to film the vows. He heads down to the glade past white lilies and a trio of classical musicians. Galvin and Bloomfield meet under a belvedere: an Italian-style rotunda with foliage winding around the columns. Before filming begins, the pair talks through the scene with director Kathy McCrae, making suggestions about how to play it. Between takes, as the sounds of lawnmowers and helicopters fade, the duo banter like an old married couple. After



Chris Warner and Rachel McKenna tie the knot on *Shortland Street*.



Put a ring on it: Chris Warner's past loves

1992: Chris married his first wife Melanie before *Shortland Street* began. She made a brief appearance on the show, creating friction between Chris and his love interest Alison Raynor (Danielle Cormack).

1993: Chris' first real love was the naive nurse from the country, Alison Raynor (Danielle Cormack). They were engaged twice. On the eve of their second attempt at marriage (at his stag night), Chris's drink was spiked by Daryl Nielsen who locked the bride groom-to-be in a barn. Chris missed his wedding and Alison believed she had been left at the altar.

1996: Chris' second wife was Tiffany Pratt (Alison James). Shortly after marrying her, he accepted a job in a private clinic in America, promising Tiffany would join him once he was settled in. But before she arrived, Chris met up with Alison again and fell in love with her

all over again. He divorced Tiffany and finally married Alison in America (1997) only to cheat on her as well. The marriage eventually ended in an acrimonious divorce and Chris returned to New Zealand.

2005: Chris' meaningless affair with nurse Toni Thompson (Laura Hill) became a little bit more significant when Toni fell pregnant. Chris and Toni didn't seem destined to be a couple, but did their best to be good parents to their son Harry. But when they found themselves working together in Fiji, sparks flew again between Chris and Toni and they were married. Sadly, however, the relationship didn't last. Chris and Toni were trying to make it work one last time when she tragically died from kidney failure in 2008.

Alison Raynor (Danielle Cormack, below) believed she'd been left at the altar by Dr Chris Warner.



Tiffany Pratt (Alison James) and a younger Chris Warner (Michael Galvin).



the final take, Bloomfield hi-fives Reid Walker (Harry), and breaks into Robot-esque dance moves, while being careful not to damage her dress.

With the dress designed by *Shortland Street* head of wardrobe Nicola Newman and made by costume designer Alice Hayes, Bloomfield got plenty of input. The first samples weren't quite right for her petite-yet-curved body shape. "I said 'this is part of my body I like and I feel like this is accentuating a bit I don't want to accentuate'. The next time I went down the dress had completely changed and highlighted the bits of my body I like. I loved it."

That dress and its wearer went through a lot during filming. "I wore it for three whole days, for 10 hours a day," Bloomfield remembers. That's not counting two-and-a-half hours in hair and makeup. "I couldn't sit down in my dress so me putting my feet up — not possible. It got pushed and pulled, that dress, but it survived, even the dancing with Chris throwing Rachel around." It's a wonder her dress didn't split when Chris, dancing like a lunatic to The Chills at the reception, dips his bride backwards. By then, Bloomfield was so drained she decided to try coffee, which she never normally touches. "It made me manic, and when the dancing finished I just crashed and felt really unwell," she says, laughing. Happily for her, the script saw *Shortland Street*'s First Couple leave the reception early.

Drama has been a constant in the pairing of *Shorty*'s longest-serving characters — beloved as much for their flaws as their good points. Their marriage is the culmination of a will-they-won't-they storyline that just won't quit. You know, unfinished business, love of my life, the one that got away.

The pair first met in the 90s, but the dashing doctor had little to do with the CEO's lippy teenage daughter. Sparks first flew in late 2001, after Chris saved Rachel from being abducted. A year later, though, Chris ended his relationship with the then out-of-control alcoholic, and Rachel fled Ferndale. (Bloomfield swapped acting for directing). When Rachel appeared briefly in 2007, she lured the then-married man into bed, and returned for good in 2009 to try to win Chris back. The pair finally got together as 2010 ended.

Since then, despite their devotion to each other and to Chris' two sons, it's been a tough few years for the couple, even by soap standards. Rachel's workaholicism caused relationship and health problems, she suffered panic attacks, was tempted by the bottle, and lost her job as CEO only to be replaced by Chris. As for Chris, he cheated on Rachel with Gabrielle, was stalked by an ex-patient and framed for her murder, then suffered a brain injury that altered his personality, leaving him far more free-spirited and zen.

Now they've got through all that, though, their relationship is more stable than ever. And the powers-that-be have decided now is the hour for a wedding. "Given their age, their histories, and what they've experienced in recent times, it seemed like the most obvious decision for the characters," says long-time *Shorty* producer Simon Bennett.

A lightbulb moment at the couple's Christmas party saw Rachel agree to marry Chris. Bloomfield thinks that decision was about acceptance. "She needed to get on board with this new person because she does love him, warts and all. She took a step back and thought 'maybe I do need to do some of these things I didn't think I would do in my life.'"

Yes, Rachel has technically married twice before, but one was a stunt to get the student allowance, and one an off-screen marriage. So Bloomfield considers this her first screen wedding. "The whole premise of this storyline is that Rachel has never wanted to be a bride, never needed or wanted to get married. So when she finally concedes, she's the anti-bride. She goes 'I'm not wearing white, I'm not doing this or that.' Certainly, she's not changing her name; when Chris calls her Mrs Almost Warner, she calls him Mr Almost McKenna.

Bloomfield says it doesn't bother Rachel that she's wife number five. "If a girlfriend of mine wanted to get married to a guy who's been married four times, I'd say 'maybe not'. Still, Chris married a lot of women but it was in his early years, and there's been so much more history between Chris and Rachel than any of his other partners. And it feels like the writers sit in this land where Chris and Rachel were always meant to be together." Now they are — but don't expect them to turn into a dull married couple. "Their relationship definitely won't be boring," Galvin says. "Never, ever boring."

Shortland Street screens at 7pm weeknights on TV2. Rachel and Chris' wedding is on air later this month.