

*A designer for the rich and famous, Rebecca Davies decided to close the label that made her name. By Claire Scobie.*

# BARE



After Rebecca Davies's first catwalk show at Australian Fashion Week in 1996, *Australian Vogue* editor Kirstie Clements dismissed her Bare collection as "poor man's Versace".

Following her second, three years later, buyers were sprinting from the show to the Bare stand and staff had to form a human chain to keep them at bay. "It was a massive, runaway hit," recalls British-born Davies, now 45. "And I was breastfeeding Daisy. I kept pulling her out from under the rail, feeding her, then shoving her back in. Lovely."

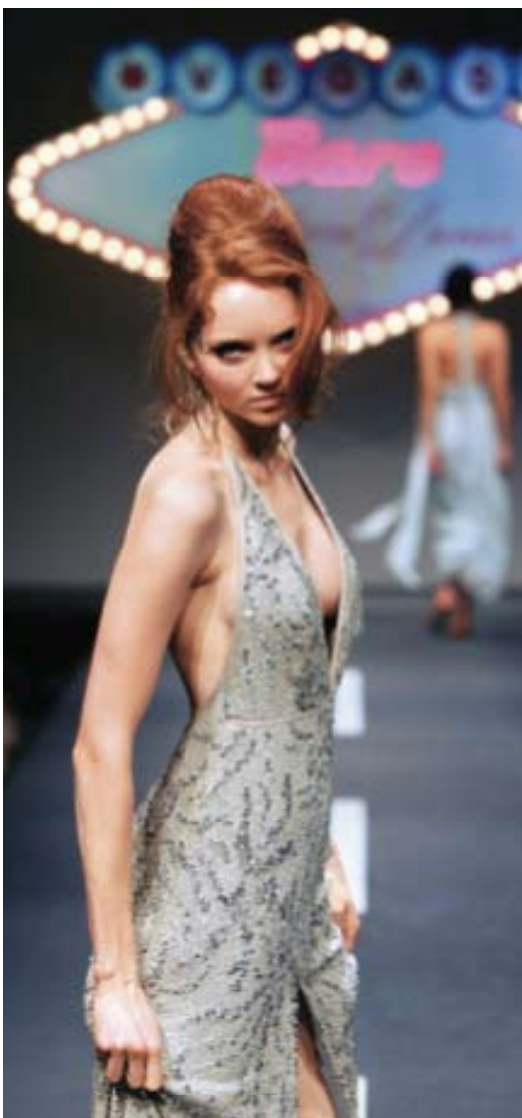
The image of Davies trying "to cover up the wet patches" as she sold "to uptight New York buyers" somehow encapsulates the blonde glamourpuss, who hails from Wembley in north-west London, swears like a trouser and calls women "birds". She describes herself as "fiery"; when working at London's Premier Model Management agency, the woman with startling blue eyes and bee-stung lips was known as "the piranha".

Today, she carries herself like a diva in a black, backless Escada dress with swooping sleeves and killer heels to match. She lives with her 42-year-old investment banker husband, Brian, and three children, Toby, 12, Daisy, now 10, and Scarlett, 7, in a grand house in Sydney's Point Piper. But Davies still sounds as if she's, in her words, "from the wrong side of the tracks". In an accent that retains a broad seam of her parents' East End origins, Davies rattles off jokes and self-deprecating asides and goes from foxy to feline, cross-eyed to purse-lipped.

"I look a right state. Make me look human, love," she tells the make-up artist before grabbing my microphone and affecting a silly, sultry voice. "Hurrell-oooo. Hell-ooooo." We are in her large, open-plan living room with chocolate sofas, bouquets of cream roses and tranquil view over boats in the harbour. Family photos are dotted throughout, alongside portraits of spirited Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, whom Davies admires as a "hardcore woman at a time when it wasn't what women did".

There, comparisons with the avant-garde painter end. To spend the morning with Rebecca Davies is to be swept up in a whirlwind of wardrobe changes – from a Max Azaria gown to Michel Perry shoes – for the photo shoot, accompanied by stories about supermodels. Her two PR sidekicks are on hand for Diet Coke and compliments; her father, Buzz Peach, is fixing the drains. When I ask him who his youngest daughter takes after, he says, with a weary smile, "Becky's always been the same. She doesn't get it [her loud, talkative nature] from me and my wife but you know where you are with her."

After Bare's sudden catwalk success in 1999, →



Rebecca Davies, with model Erica Baxter, tackles the catwalk on crutches at Australian Fashion Week in 2005; (above) English model Lily Cole models a Bare dress in 2006.

Selfridges took Davies to lunch; British *Vogue* did a profile and Victoria Beckham (then Posh Spice) bought her entire collection. Since then Bare dresses – known for their tropical colours and silks edged with sparkle and beading – have graced the bodies of Julianne Moore, Liz Hurley, Kim Cattrall and Kylie, among others. David Jones, Browns in London and Neiman Marcus in New York have all clamoured for her designs, also sold at four Sydney boutiques.

And then, without warning, Davies announced in February that she was quitting and that when the lease of the last store expired in July, the bright flame of Bare would be extinguished for good. Davies won't say how much she's walking away from, nor is she contemplating selling the business and staying on as a consultant: "I couldn't just be a finger-in-the-pie type of chick... If you're not switched on 100 per cent, the collection is not 100 per cent."

If the idea to rearrange her priorities had been

packed up her Bare offices. The last house, she thinks, was jinxed. Her father became ill, as did her mother, seriously so – she's in remission from lung cancer – and three years ago, Rebecca, a good skier, broke her leg in Thredbo. The following week, her sister was diagnosed with leukaemia.

The freak accident left Davies with 16 pins and two plates in her left leg; she underwent three major operations, culminating in a hip graft, and came close to losing the leg below the knee. "I would have been a Mrs McCartney," she snorts, half-laughing. After two years in a wheelchair and on crutches – "I was a nice person during that phase," she mutters darkly – Davies can now wear heels again, just. To cope, she threw herself into work. "That was my escape ... [and] when I did the best stuff. I would wake up in the middle of the night and design something new."

Since her 20s, Rebecca Davies has lived and breathed fashion. After joining London's Premier

## After 12-hour days, Davies would "go out for dinner and party til 4am..."

brewing for some time, the final decision came last October after she visited her elder sister, Debbie Erickson, in hospital in Nashville, Tennessee. Physically disabled since birth and diabetic, Erickson, 52, has advanced leukaemia and recently underwent a stem cell transplant. "They radiate you, give you chemo and kill off everything in your body. It's wretched treatment," says Davies, who flew out with her 74-year-old mother, Pat. For five years, Davies's parents and younger brother, Jamie, who ran the business side of Bare, have lived close by in Sydney.

"The hospital was a harsh, confronting environment," she continues. "We stayed there for 10 days and each night Mum and I would go out and get blind [drunk]. It was so traumatic." Saying goodbye to Debbie, married to an American marine with a 12-year-old daughter, was "totally wrenching". She pauses. "There's no guarantee."

By the time Davies returned, she'd made up her mind. "I thought, I don't want to do this any more. I haven't smelt the roses, I've forgotten to have a good time. There are a million other things I want to do." Among them is spending more time with her children. Money is clearly no issue. Husband Brian supports her decision and is about to embark on an investment project with Jamie. "It's his time to shine," she says. Sally Brown, Davies's PR, puts it like this: "With Bare comes Rebecca Davies. So essentially she's retiring at 45. If she stayed on, she would still have been aligned with the whole game and she's had enough."

Within three months, Davies had put the family house on the market, moved a few streets away and

model agency as a booker, she moved quickly up the ranks and by 1988 worked as head booker at Elite Model Management in Paris. It was a giddy, reckless time – unlimited expense accounts and champagne on tap – and Davies would put in 12-hour days, "then get dressed and go out for dinner, party til 4am and do it all again".

Skinny with big hair and decked in clingy Azzedine Alaïa, Davies lived with David Austin, bass guitarist from pop group Wham!, who had a recording studio in St Germain. In 1990, after one party, Davies found herself organising five top models – Cindy Crawford, Christy Turlington, Linda Evangelista, Naomi Campbell and Tatjana Patitz – for George Michael's *Freedom 90* video. "I said, 'Wouldn't it be fun if we had a video using all these girls and got them lip-synching?'" It was a pissed conversation. The next day, George calls me up – in the middle of Fashion Week in Paris – and says, 'Come on, get the girls.'"

"It was the time of the supermodel," says Davies. "It had gone from being a straightforward modelling business to suddenly the girls becoming brand images." As their agent, she became their mum, doctor, confidante and friend. "If they acted out of turn, we used to haul them in like naughty school girls." One day, Naomi Campbell, going out with boxer Mike Tyson at the time, called to say she was late for a shoot because her cousin had been shot. Davies' reply: "Let's have a cup of tea, love, and we'll get you there." So what is Naomi like? "She came out and stayed with me. I've always adored her but she started modelling at 14. Go figure."

After five years in Paris, Davies, suddenly, had →

Brian and Rebecca Davies in Venice in 2006; (right) Rebecca with children Toby, Scarlett and Daisy.



## “I wasn’t ready. I was struggling to meet the demand. I had kids. I didn’t want to travel.”

had enough. (There seems to be a pattern here.) She went back to London and John Casablancas promptly asked her to relocate to the Elite agency in New York. Davies had just turned 30; she was burnt out and unhappy and decided she needed a holiday. Four weeks later, she landed in Australia.

That was 1992. After some waitressing, she became friends with Priscilla Leighton-Clark, owner of Priscilla Model Management, and started working part-time as a booker for \$100 a day. “The next thing, we’ve got half the girls I used to book coming out from Paris, the other half coming out from London.” Now with Leighton-Clark godmother to Davies’s son, the pair would “scream at each other, have terrible blues” and then make up over a facial.

Despite repeated phone calls from Casablancas, Davies turned down the New York offer, too seduced by life in Sydney.

Then there’s the story of how Davies met her husband, which could have been from a romantic comedy. At the ripe old age of 32, Rebecca Peach, as she was then, thought a “life on the shelf” beckoned. But Brian Davies, then working for an investment bank, knew from the moment he met her that this was the girl he wanted to marry. Except she was dating a younger man and he had an English girlfriend and was moving to Hong Kong.

When Rebecca heard that Brian was throwing a leaving party for his girlfriend, who was moving to Hong Kong four days before him, she ditched her young lover and flew back from Milan for the party. Three days later, Brian took Rebecca out to dinner at up-market restaurant Bilson’s at Circular Quay. She appeared with that “no make-up, spent five hours

[applying it] look”; he wore new shiny shoes and brought perfume and flowers. “I thought,” Davies pauses dramatically, “slightly wally, I can deal with it.”

By the end of the night, he asked if she’d consider marrying him. He promised to return from Hong Kong, where he was due to meet his girlfriend. Five days later, after mailing a gift to Rebecca every day, he was back, leaving his devastated ex to return to London. Less than two weeks after their first date, he sent a clown to the Priscilla offices to read a poem, before arriving himself with “a peach rose for a Peach,” says Davies. “Then he got down on his knee and we’ve been together ever since.”

There is a collective sigh from the women – PRs, make-up artist, photographer – now gathered around Davies, who attracts attention like magnets draw iron filings. She leans forward conspiratorially.

The story, clearly, is not over. Several years and three children later, Davies was in London for Fashion Week and had arranged to visit a girlfriend for lunch, who had invited another friend, nicknamed “Vage”. “On my children’s life,” says Davies, “I walk into San Lorenzo’s, I see a table of old friends I hate, and my girlfriend and I sit down. She says, ‘Oh look, here’s Vage.’ I look up and it’s [Brian’s ex].” As she approached, Davies dashed for the other table before she returned. “What could I say? Sorry?” Davies slaps her hands together. “I couldn’t believe it. It was a series of unfortunates. It only happens to me.” Improbably, they had a good meal, says Davies, “and I ended up showing her pictures of the kids.”

Davies started Bare after the birth of Toby, in 1994. Her first 12-piece collection was in ice blue,

white and black. She saw an opening for sleek designs in Sydney because, she says, “back then it was Krystle Carrington meets Joan Collins on a bad day. In London, it was all about black stretch suiting and pared-down minimalism, all fabulous.”

What Davies wanted was sexy, simple silhouettes: “Hence the name Bare.” As a teenager, she had spent her summers soaking up the glitz and glamour of St Tropez and Bare reflected the fusion of earlier influences, from Joseph to John Galliano, married to the vivid colours of Australia. After her initial success, Bare lurched from peak to trough as the business expanded too quickly. Her third collection was disastrous. “I wasn’t ready for it. I was struggling to meet the demand,” she says. “I had kids. I didn’t want to travel. Then I started to build up in a manageable way and didn’t do catwalks for about five years.” When she did, in 2004, “it went mad again”.

Davies says she has a love-hate relationship with the fashion industry and now designing is “a chore instead of a pleasure”. So what’s next? Obsessive as ever, she has returned to her teenage passion: horse riding. Despite the amount of hardware in her leg, Davies now practises dressage on a 17-hand dapple-grey nicknamed Super and plans to start competing. At their weekender in Robertson, in the Southern Highlands, close to fellow designer Lisa Ho’s place, Davies is building an arena and stables.

It’s time for a change. “You know you are an old lady when you say, ‘I bought this in the ’80s.’ And my staff, God love ’em, who are all quite young, say, ‘Oh, it’s vintage.’ When vintage becomes 20 years old, you know you gotta get out the business.” ●