

Rachel Ward would rather not talk about her past as a Hollywood actress. In fact, she can barely bring herself to mention her starring role in the 1983 television series *The Thorn Birds*. Ward beat actresses such as Michelle Pfeiffer to the role of the beguiling Meggie Cleary, whose scandalous affair with the family priest (Richard Chamberlain) gripped audiences and made her an international star. ‘Yuck!’ she shrieks. ‘Pure melodramatic slush.’ She covers her face with her hands. ‘I mean, that’s by far the most successful thing I was involved in. But I always felt mortified by the attention. I don’t know why I ended up being an actress. I felt very uncomfortable with it.’

You sense that it has taken many years for Ward, now 52, to feel at ease with herself. As the Earl of Dudley’s niece, Ward was brought up in Cornwell Manor in the Cotswolds, and raised to follow the conventions of her class: to marry within her circle and become a society wife. But she says, ‘I wanted independence very early. I always felt my temperature was too hot for England, a bit too emotional for it.’

Since 1983 Ward has lived in Australia, married to the Australian actor Bryan Brown, with whom she has three children. The pair met on the set of *The Thorn Birds* (he played Meggie’s errant husband) and are one of Australia’s enduring celebrity couples, known for their laidback barbecues attended by the likes of Richard E Grant and Nicole Kidman. They live in a 19th-century cottage in the water-side suburb of Balmain, New South Wales.

Ward waves me through the living-room, crammed with patterned sofas, piles of books and original paintings from Australian artists such as Charles Blackman, to the veranda, furnished with a mix of daybeds and deckchairs. It has a glorious view across the garden to the sparkling Sydney Harbour. With her slender frame, tapered cheekbones and fiery mahogany eyes, Ward remains effortlessly glamorous. Her dark hair is tousled; her face tanned. Recently back from India, she wears a black embroidered trouser suit and chunky silver bangles; on her feet, turned-up leather slippers. ‘I like a good ethnic look,’ she quips. It is a Sunday and Mother’s Day – in Australia, it falls in May – but as she’s filming during the week, this is her only available time.

I am here to talk about Ward’s successful transition from acting to directing (she continued to act intermittently

following her move to Australia, most recently in the ABC TV series *Rainshadow* in 2007, but wrote and directed her first short film in 2000) and her first feature film, *Beautiful Kate*. This arresting debut has already garnered widespread acclaim in Australia and on the international film festival circuit. Ward describes *Beautiful Kate*, written in 1982 by the American author Newton Thornburg, as the story of a family ‘imploding in their own rather caustic environment’. Ward wrote the screenplay herself, transferring the original setting of Chicago to the Australian outback. It tells the story of Ned Kendall (Ben Mendelsohn), the twin brother of ‘Beautiful Kate’ (mesmerisingly played by the newcomer Sophie Lowe) who at the request of his long-suffering sister (Rachel Griffiths) returns to the family home

**‘I like the ambiguous morality of society, the grey areas. When do you cross that line?’**

on a remote sheep station in South Australia after a 20-year absence, to see his dying father, Bruce Kendall (played by Bryan Brown). Tensions inevitably run high, culminating in Ned confronting his cantankerous father, and in a series of flashbacks the traumatic events of one fateful teenage summer are revealed. The eerie silence of the outback seeps into the characters, fuelling the sense of isolation. Ward handles a tough subject matter with considerable poise and sensitivity, and the result is a remarkable feature debut: powerful, brooding and at times deeply unsettling. ‘It’s quite Catholic, my film,’ Ward laughs. ‘It’s all about guilt, confession and reconciliation and retribution.’

How was it directing your husband?

‘It was fine. It was combustible, for sure. I had more arguments with him than with anybody else.’ She credits Brown, however, as a ‘very good script editor’.

Ward says she is drawn to darkness. ‘I like stories about failure. I like the ambiguous morality of society, the grey areas. When do you cross that line?’ Initially she was attracted to the character of Kate. ‘I liked how she was driving the scenes. She had the same quality as Scarlett O’Hara. You admire the courage and the chutzpah, although you recognise that she probably needs a good smack.’

Ward considers *Beautiful Kate* a stark portrayal of what

# Change of heart

Disillusioned with the eye-candy roles she was being offered, Rachel Ward turned her back on Hollywood. It was only years later that she accidentally discovered her love of directing. By **Claire Scobie**. Photograph by **Hugh Stewart**

Rachel Ward in New South Wales: ‘My family is a veritable Tom Stoppard play.’  
**Hair and make-up** Nadine Monley at Names Agency





happens when you strip back 'the polite veneer in families. Beneath is a seething pot of resentments, guilt, failure, sibling rivalry, all sorts of things,' she says. Any of that in your family? 'God, yes!' she says. 'My family is a veritable Tom Stoppard play.'

Ward once described the world she grew up in as one where 'men guffaw, smoke cigars and shoot little birds and women get moved down the table the less pretty and amusing they become'. She describes her father, Peter Alistair Ward, the son of the 3rd Earl of Dudley, as a 'terrible snob', who found his elder daughter 'perplexing'. Nobody cared if the school reports for Rachel, or her younger sister, Tracy, were poor. Yet if her younger brother, Alexander, was below par, 'he would get the strap.'

Even so, Ward describes her childhood as 'very happy' with a 'fantastic' mother, Claire Ward, with whom she is still very close. Her parents divorced when she was 12. Her mother would go on to become the long-term partner of Lord Lambton, whose career as a Tory minister ended in 1973 after he was caught in bed with two prostitutes, smoking marijuana; her father remarried and had two more sons.

'It was a very un-traumatic divorce,' Ward says. 'I was at boarding school. My dad wasn't a bad dad, but he wasn't really involved in family life anyway, so after the divorce he was just a bit more absent than he usually was.' She describes one occasion when he came to watch her playing the lead role in *The Mikado* at Hatherop Castle school in Gloucestershire. 'He sat in the front row and fell asleep and snored all the way through.' She chortles. 'I really don't say this in any self-pitying way. I found it amusing.' She adds, 'There was no question of getting a big head.'

## 'It was only when I became a filmmaker that I stopped being embarrassed about who I was'

**From top** Sophie Lowe as Kate in Rachel Ward's *Beautiful Kate*; Bryan Brown, Ward's husband, as Bruce in *Beautiful Kate*; Ward on set with Ben Mendelsohn (Ned)

When Peter Ward died last year, neither she nor Tracy, married to the Duke of Beaufort's son and heir, Henry Somerset, the Marquess of Worcester, was mentioned in the will. 'All the money went to our younger brother, Alexander.' Ward was left nothing, not even a picture.

'It's nothing to do with wanting [the money]. It's got to do with how toxic that system is and what it does to families. I couldn't live in that society. It is a feudal world.' She admires Tracy, a long-term environmental campaigner, 'fighting the good fight'.

Ward admits she barely finished her O-levels, then dropped out of art school, before turning to modelling aged 17. 'I had no other skills.' Ribbed by East End photographers for her cut-glass accent, with a title that always preceded her, at 19 she moved to New York. 'There I was taken at face value. It was liberating.' She modelled for the Elite and Zoli agencies, partied hard, and had a fling with David Kennedy, the son of the assassinated senator Bobby Kennedy. Through Zoli she started getting roles in commercials and low-budget horror films and then moved to Los Angeles, getting her first break when Burt Reynolds cast her in *Sharkey's*



*Machine* (1981). 'For a moment I was on the A-list,' she says. For the next few years she was, she says, typecast as 'the exotic European' in such films as *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* with Steve Martin and *Against All Odds*. 'It was really how much cleavage you could get in each shot. It's all about whether you will wear the diamond earrings or the red bathing suit. I was very quickly disenchanted with the roles available to me.'

Indeed, the red bathing suit became a huge point of contention for Ward. In 1984, when *Against All Odds* was released, a billboard on Sunset Boulevard showed her in a red swimsuit, 'leering over my co-star, Jeff Bridges, with enhanced breasts. I just felt very cheap,' she would say later. By then, Ward had married Brown in a small ceremony on the family's Cornwell estate. Did he rescue you? 'Yes,' she says cautiously. 'He gave me an alternative to playing asinine roles in Hollywood. There was an exoticness about him. That's why you fall for someone, you connect on a deeper level.'

At the age of 25, when Ward first moved to Australia, she and Brown lived on the isolated but beautiful Whale Beach 25 miles north of Sydney. Those first years bringing up three children – Rosie, now 25 and at design college in London, Matilda, 23, a filmmaker, and 17-year-old Joe – she admits were tough. 'Bryan's career was in full flight and mine had ground to a halt once I'd moved to Australia. So I was either trailing along after him or at home with two small



**'The Thorn Birds was by far the most successful thing I was involved in. But it was pure, melodramatic slush'**

**Right** Ward and Bryan Brown in *The Thorn Birds* (1983), the film on which they first met. **Below** with Jeff Bridges in *Against All Odds* (1984)

kids. I felt quite isolated with no extended family around me. I did stamp my foot a bit.' But, Ward says, simply, 'I found my man. He was there one hundred per cent. He's a fantastic father.' While it has taken time, and part of her remains 'very English', she considers Australia home.

Like her sister, Ward has devoted herself extensively to charity work, and in 2005 she and Brown received the Order of Australia for their services. Over the years, the couple have expanded their notion of family and mentored countless young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. During the interview a young teenager, who is currently living with the family, wanders through. Ward says the motivation 'is to be useful. My great-grandmother was the fourth governor-general's wife in Australia, and she started the Bush



Nurses Association here. Maybe I got it from her.'

After being a full-time mother, a prolific fundraiser and an occasional actress, Ward decided to finish her education in 1993, at the age of 35, three days after Joe's birth. She did a communications and writing degree at Sydney's University of Technology. 'At that time I wanted to get out of the film industry,' she says. But after making a short film with her children, she 'loved it' and immediately started writing scripts. She wrote and directed two short films (both influenced by her fascination with the 'ambiguous morality of society, the grey areas'): a 24-minute prison drama, *The Big House*, in 2000, and three years later *Martha's New Coat*, a 52-minute drama starring her daughter Matilda as a headstrong teenager in search of her father. She then started working on feature-length scripts (two are still in her 'bottom drawer') and in 2005 began focusing seriously on *Beautiful Kate*. It took two years of hard graft 'to get the script right. It was a big learning curve,' Ward says.

With Brown hovering ('Now girls, it's Mother's Day and we are taking you to lunch. So can you wrap this up soon?'), I ask Ward if she has come to embrace her privilege. She thinks about this. 'Yes. It has taken me quite a long time. I'm not nearly so self-conscious about it, not apologising. It was really only when I became a filmmaker that I stopped being embarrassed about what I did and who I was.' She smiles. 'I think that for somebody who had a really bad education and who isn't the smartest on the block, I've done OK. It shows what tenacity can do.'

*'Beautiful Kate' is out on July 30*

ALL STAR: REX FEATURES



The Cotswold is a new collection from Old Charm, a beautiful, soft country style dining collection traditionally crafted from seasoned elm, with a difference. . .

. . . you design it to your taste, from timber shade, leg shape, and fabric pattern. You can even choose from six door handle styles.



Exciting concept in the way you choose your furniture. . . design it yourself!



**Step 1.**  
Select your  
wood colour



**Step 2.**  
Select your  
leg moulding



**Step 3.**  
Select your  
fabric



**Step 4.**  
Select your  
door handles



For stockist information or a FREE brochure call 01920 469241 or visit [www.oldcharm.co.uk](http://www.oldcharm.co.uk)