

Review

A Woman *of* Substance

Rachel Ward
adds feature film
director to her
list of credits

I'm listening:
Psychotherapy on
the small screen
FEATURE P6

Whatever happened?
Peter Moon makes
a comeback
TELEVISION P24





The RACHEL PAPERS

Feisty at 50, Rachel Ward has made a powerfully dramatic feature film, her first as director.

Eddie Cockrell tries to keep up

IF, as Socrates contemplated, the unexamined life is not worth living, then Rachel Ward is doing her best to maintain a value-added existence. She has been a model, actress, mother, activist and writer. When the hotly anticipated feature *Beautiful Kate* appears in competition at the Sydney Film Festival the transition will be complete: she will have become Rachel Ward, director.

Born to British aristocracy, after early roles as a modern femme fatale in 1980s action-film noir fare such as *Sharky's Machine*, *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid*, *Against All Odds* and *After Dark*, *My Sweet*, Ward turned her back on what she remembers as a contentious Hollywood career. After meeting actor Bryan Brown while filming the immensely popular television miniseries *The Thorn Birds* in 1982 she came to Australia and raised three children.

With her move into directing, Ward easily could be dismissed as an avid hobbyist, and the assumption made that her connections alone would ensure this next stage in her career at the age of 50.

But hang on. Surely we know all this? Typical of her tongue-in-cheek self-awareness, Ward knows we do, which is why the production company website she runs with Brown advises: "It is inconceivable that anyone could want any information beyond the breasts and pouts of Rachel Ward so readily available on Google. On the off chance, she welcomes you."

In person she exudes the same voluble insouciance: outspoken, unexpectedly determined and single-minded, warmly inclusive and faintly intimidating.

Ward isn't short of an opinion and she likes being in control. One can see this deliberate frankness in her films. All three — *Beautiful Kate* and two earlier shorter films — contain material that dares the audience to draw breath, to be offended.

This directness is present in her everyday conversation. She doesn't want, or indeed expect, everyone to like her and one suspects that attitude helps shape her creative choices.

Spend no more than one or two hours in her company and it becomes clear that *Beautiful Kate* is precisely the film Ward wanted — and needed — to make.

Shot on location in the Flinders Ranges in South Australia, *Beautiful Kate* — which Ward has adapted from American author Newton Thornburg's 1982 novel — is a drama of family skeletons and hard-fought redemption. It

centres on the return of black sheep Ned Kendall (Ben Mendelsohn) to the run-down farm inhabited by his spinsterish sister Sally (Rachel Griffiths, returning to Australian film) and dying father Bruce, a fiery Brown.

As Ned alternately beds and fights off bored sexpot fiancée Toni (Maeve Dermody), he begins scribbling a memoir of the traumatic teenage summer that saw the death of his beloved, free-spirited twin sister Kate (Sophie Lowe) in a car accident and the mysterious suicide of his brother Cliff (Josh McFarlane). In a bravura series of tightly woven flashbacks, the young and older Kendalls re-enact the past, grapple with the present and face the future.

Beautiful Kate is a model of screenwriting discipline and actorly direction. The setting has been transposed deftly from the novel's blighted Chicago suburbs to the outback, a handful of characters have been pruned back or omitted, and the difficult parallel narratives are handled with skill.

Ward had been familiar with the novel for more than a decade. She found the material compelling but had to wait five years, until the rights suddenly became available (they had been held by a US production company) to be able to tackle the project.

"I think when you're in my position you have to find things that have slipped through the net," Ward says, sitting in the cosy comfort of a pub near the home in Sydney's inner west she shares with Brown. It is August 2008 and she's two weeks into the eight-week process of editing the film. "[I'm] not saying that it's an easy thing to do an adaptation but god, it's hard to come up with a good original story, and I've certainly tried."

While it may seem a folly for novice directors to cut their teeth on a film that has challenges inherent in the narrative style and the material, Ward is seldom one to take no for an answer. The finished product is an affecting and disturbing (in a good way) story about coming to grips with the past. It has resonance in Ward's own history.

Since about the time she married Brown and relocated to Australia, Ward has had a very public love-hate relationship with her acting career. Though outspoken in her distaste for the Hollywood system, she simultaneously defends the choices she made at the time. "I give myself credit for being bold enough to go there," she says firmly. "To front up to auditions, to get the bollocking you get, to get the nos, to get the knockabouts that you get."

Tongue-in-cheek self-awareness: Rachel Ward, main picture; and Ben Mendelsohn and Maeve Dermody in *Beautiful Kate*, below
Main picture: Adam Knott

"You have to be pretty brave to go down that road, and I had as much right to be there as anybody has a right to play the piano in an orchestra or put a picture in an exhibition or whatever. You are being creative, and yet the end result has no reflection on your sensibility, necessarily."

Films remain frozen in their time, can be rediscovered and re-evaluated. Seen in this light, Ward's Hollywood work is remarkably durable, both for the link to past Hollywood femmes fatales and the fact that in all her roles she is, well, recognisably Rachel Ward. Her initial grin at Burt Reynolds in *Sharky's Machine* ("My first big break," she says gratefully) announces a beauty devoid of self-consciousness, while the running gag of pulling various bullets out of Steve Martin's gumshoe detective with her teeth in *Dead Men* suggests an actress chosen for her willingness to take startling comic chances.

And consider this: *Sharky's Machine* is a loose remake of Otto Preminger's *Laura* with Ward in the Gene Tierney role, while she shares scenes in the '80s pop-culture hit *Against All Odds* with Jane Greer, the little-remembered yet influential actress who, four decades before, defined the femme fatale opposite Robert Mitchum in director Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past*.

It's in *Against All Odds* that Ward has arguably her most transcendent onscreen moment: as the closing credits begin, just as Phil Collins's soon-to-be-ubiquitous song fires up, director Taylor Hackford devotes an uninterrupted 80 seconds to Ward's face, running the gamut of emotions as she gazes at co-star Jeff Bridges. That level of unvarnished openness is not something one learns, it's something with which one is born.

Finally, in director Russell Mulcahy's affecting and overlooked 2000 remake of the Nevil Shute novel *On the Beach*, Ward energises every scene she's in as the vivacious divorcee determined to dance into the apocalypse: a role, it should be mentioned, played by Ava Gardner in the original film.

The list of veteran actors with whom she's worked includes Reynolds, Richard Widmark, Carl Reiner, Vittorio Gassman and Bruce Dern. Through the magic of clever editing she even shares a phone conversation with Humphrey Bogart in *Dead Men*.

In short, Ward's decade-long stay in the Hollywood spotlight was not only a transitional period for an entire Hollywood genre, but for the woman herself.

"It never really happened for me," she says, referring to the stardom that conveys the power to select and sculpt roles. "I felt misrepresented. I wanted to take control of what I wanted to say, how I would express these characters. How I would tell the story, how I would shoot this scene. And I was always at odds, I think, with my directors about the way they told their stories and how my character came out in the end."

Ward's own production company operates under the simple philosophy that "if you own it, they can't tell you you can't be in it". Or write it or direct it for that matter. As an actor Ward felt beholden to writers and then directors to provide films in which she could shine. The way to take that control back was, initially, to write. Short stories, articles, columns and, inevitably, films, followed. Throughout this progression, her own thoughts and experiences were grist for the mill.

Inspired by character-driven tales, Ward's initial forays into directing dealt with the ambiguous morality of society. "They [her two short films] were re-evaluating those grey areas. For me, they are the most interesting stories. I like that grey area."

She's referring to the 24-minute prison drama *The Big House*, made in 2000, and *Martha's New Coat*, the 52-minute 2003 drama starring Ward's daughter Matilda Brown as a headstrong rural adolescent in search of her biological father.

Both films performed respectably at festivals

but they were neither traditional short films — less than 15 minutes — or recognised long-length feature films, which run at least 80 minutes. Inevitably, these movies have been dubbed "schlongs" by the ever-mischievous Brown.

Ward jokes that "one of the incentives to make a feature film was that I could get my bloody shorts on a DVD". Should this eventuate, the films will show narrative and visual consistency, from themes of adolescent angst to difficult to manage point-of-view handheld shots, and a unified typeface in the credit sequences (the calligraphy on the poster and film print of *Beautiful Kate* is "Brown's").

Unsurprisingly, some of her favourite recent films are directed by women. They include Carine Adler's *Under the Skin*, Caroline Link's Oscar-winning *Nowhere in Africa* and Christine Jeffs's *Rain*.

Men make the cut as well. Favourites include John Schlesinger's *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Nicolas Roeg's *Walkabout*, Lukas

my privilege and position. I think in a way it was sort of a need to get a bit of balance in my life."

Ward had a friend who was involved with street kids and street life, and she found his stories compelling. The impetus to get involved, though, was more personal. Ward saw something of herself in these young people with very different stories.

"That's why I got involved in these family support programs like Aunties and Uncles and Big Brothers, Big Sisters. I didn't have extended family and so much of Australia is made out of the migrant experience where none of us have family. We don't have the aunts and uncles, we don't have the friends, we don't have the people you can lean on. So I really got the alienation of the migrant sort of thing."

Though Ward and Thornburg have never been in the same room together, at some point during the gestation of *Beautiful Kate*, the author mailed the director a first-edition hardcover copy of the novel. In the spidery yet determined hand that belies the partial paraly-



'I've dreamed of having my film in the Sydney Film Festival and at the State Theatre'

Moodysson's *Lilja 4-Ever* and Alexander Payne's *About Schmidt*, as well as Ted Kotcheff's recently re-discovered *Wake in Fright* (aka *Outback*).

Note that most of these films involve actors taking risks not only with their characters, but with their bodies. "I found nudity in films incredibly difficult," Ward remembers. "I found being the fantasy figure very difficult. I wanted to be real. It's ironic, you know, I've spent my life trying to convince directors to keep my top on, and here I am directing these young girls and convincing them to take their tops off! Both Maeve and Sophie found that very difficult and I did find myself reflecting on feeling very similar things to them."

A recipient of the Order of Australia for her extensive charity work, Ward weaves working-class and Aboriginal elements into all her work. She also remembers vividly what got her involved in social causes in the first place. It isn't from an aristocratic sense of social duty. Rather, like her artistic metamorphosis, it is driven by something unrequited in her soul.

"It was a thing that came out of living up at the northern beaches [of Sydney] and being a migrant, feeling very alienated, feeling very trapped and also not being able to get work here. And I have no skills, really, and I married quite young. So I really found myself in a dead-end situation and I felt fairly sorry for myself."

"At the same time I was completely aware of

that has landed the writer in a nursing home just outside Seattle, Thornburg's inscription reads, in part: "Though I believe you were born to play *Beautiful Kate*, I've settled for you just creating her on film."

"God I hope he gets to see it and likes it," Ward says fervently. "That would be wonderful. I think everybody wants to make a great film. It's an almighty challenge to make a good movie."

Now there's the Sydney Film Festival premiere to prepare for and the business of selling the film to overseas markets and accompanying its festival journey for the next year or so.

Ward is really chuffed about the gala premiere: "I don't think it comes any better than having your film shown at the State Theatre. How can you beat that? I go to the Sydney Film Festival religiously, I take the bus in to see everything. And, yeah, like any filmmaker in Australia, I've dreamed of having my film in the Sydney festival and at the State Theatre."

"I had success at 25 as an actress. Took it for granted, didn't appreciate it for a second, thought it was my due! Then you learn, then you struggle, then you realise how hard it is, and you know."

Beautiful Kate is released nationally on August 6.

HOT SHOTS

★★★★★ Angels & Demons (M)

Tom Hanks returns as Robert Langdon in this rollicking adaptation of another of Dan Brown's preposterously successful books. This time his aim is to prevent an ultra-secret society from killing four cardinals and blowing up Vatican City. The ridiculous plot has been transformed into a superior popcorn movie. **David Stratton**

★★★★★ Gomorrah (MA15+)

This brave, humane, deeply harrowing film from director Matteo Garrone has five interlocking stories about the Camorra, the murderous criminal network operating in southern Italy. Shrewdly observed characters provide startling and often moving insights into a world of social desperation and criminal ruthlessness. **Evan Williams**



Harrowing: A scene from *Gomorrah*

★★★★★ X-Men Origins: Wolverine (M)

Shot mainly in Sydney, the fourth instalment of the saga is terrific fun and wonderful to watch. Director Gavin Hood (*Tsotsi*) delivers striking action scenes and more than usually clever effects, with Hugh Jackman, the first of the mutants, combining old-fashioned leading-man sexiness with feral virility and menace. **E. W.**

★★★★★ Synecdoche, New York (M)

Charlie Kaufman's debut as director is clever and demanding. A small-town theatre director (Philip Seymour Hoffman) battles his demons and engages with some interesting women (Catherine Keener, Samantha Morton, Michelle Williams). But as the characters are duplicated and then triplicated, this incredibly original film threatens to collapse under the weight of its own artifice. **D. S.**

★★★★★ Star Trek (M)

The 11th *Star Trek* in 20 years has a cast of eager new faces filling in the back stories of the familiar characters, returning us to the beginnings of the series and the first mission of USS Enterprise. Chris Pine makes a boyishly engaging Captain Kirk, with Zachary Quinto as the calculating Spock. Compulsory viewing for Trekkies. **E. W.**

★★★★★ Samson and Delilah (MA15+)

One of the finest films made in this country, Warwick Thornton's immensely touching and beautiful movie explores the relationship between two Aboriginal teenagers living in a remote community beyond Alice Springs. With hardly a word of dialogue, the film tells a deeply affecting story in purely visual terms and there are wonderful, natural performances from Rowan McNamara and Marissa Gibson in the leading roles. **D. S.**