

ITA BUTTROSE AND Asher Keddie are at dinner in a small chic restaurant in Sydney's Surry Hills, a week before filming is due to begin on the ABC mini-series, *Paper Giants: The Birth of Cleo*.

Asher is ... how shall we put it? *Perspiring*. And not just because the night is steamy. Next to her is one of the most famous women in the country, the woman she's about to try and embody on the screen as a 30-year-old magazine editor launching the ground-breaking magazine, *Cleo*, in 1972.

It's only the second time the two have met and Asher – never one to be easily intimidated – is suddenly aware that her every movement and expression is being scrutinised.

“Will you stop that?” Ita commands.

“What?” the actor replies.

“You're sitting like me.”

“No, I'm not.”

“Yes, you are.”

And then they both burst out laughing, to the blessed relief of everyone else at the table. Here – for the student of characterisation and sub-plot – is a delicious example of the observed (Ita) observing the observer (Asher) and both observer and observed approving of what they see.

“Her hands were imitating where mine were – on the side of my face or under my chin,” Ita happily recalls to *The Weekly* now (a magazine she, herself, edited in the mid-1970s), “and I have never seen anyone doing that before.” (If truth be known, Asher Keddie's been doing it since she was a child.)

Yet whether these things are already part of an actor's make-up, it obviously ▶

# ASHER THE GIRL WHO PLAYED ITA

From Ita's lisp to Blanche's vulnerability, Asher Keddie has made celebrity roles her own. Yet there's more to this versatile actress than mere mimicry, as David Leser discovers.

## THE GIRL WHO PLAYED ITA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRANT MATTHEWS. STYLING BY JUDITH COOK AND OLIVIA FLEWING. HAIR BY KENNETH STODDART. MAKE-UP BY LINDA JEFFERVES. ASHER WEARS RALPH LAUREN COAT, HOSS INTROPIA JUMPER FROM CHRISTENSEN COPENHAGEN, MORRISON SKIRT, TONY WHITE EARRINGS AND OROTON BELT.

Away from the limelight, Asher Keddie loves nothing better than spending time with her horses on the property she shares with her husband in Victoria's Macedon Ranges.

Asher wowed audiences as writer Blanche d'Alpuget in the 2010 telemovie *Hawke* (below) and more recently as Ita Buttrose in *Paper Giants: The Birth Of Cleo* (right).



really long stride and Ita has quite a short, brisk style, so I loved walking like her. Her walk is just so buoyant. *She's so buoyant.*"

And then, of course, there was *the lisp*, which, thankfully, Asher kept to herself the night of their historic dinner. (She hadn't actually started practising it yet!)

It was only when filming began that she took it on with gusto, never letting it go – before work, during work or after work.

"As soon as she walked through the door you could tell that something was different," her husband, musician-actor Jay Bowen, tells *The Weekly*. "She was sort of holding her body differently, holding her face differently. The walk was different and I knew straightaway she was still in the middle of playing Ita."

Asher insists it wasn't a choice. It's the way she always tries to inhabit her characters. "It was a big thing for me to take on," she says with an unmistakable lisp. "I kept the voice right in the front of my face the whole way through."

Are you lisping now, I ask, a little incredulously. "I have always had a slight sibilant 's'," she replies, her green cat's eyes sparkling, "and when I'm trying to explain something to someone, it can be a little more pronounced."

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FOR A FEMALE actor looking for challenging roles, it's probably triumph

enough to be able to say you've taken on the hue and colour of one of Australia's most noteworthy – and formidable – women during a calendar year. Yet Asher Keddie has managed to do much more than that these past 12 months.

In July 2010, she appeared as writer Blanche d'Alpuget in the controversial telemovie, *Hawke*, and, once again, managed to realise both the strength and vulnerability of the former prime minister's mistress-turned-second-wife. In the process, she won an AFI nomination for the role.

For Asher, it was one of her hardest roles to date. "She's such an enigma in a way," Asher says. "I mean, we know what we know of Blanche through the press and I'm not saying that's right or wrong ... but it's really pretty one-sided. So, for me as an actor, trying to delve into a personality ... that wasn't easy because the public perception is truly one-sided."

"She asked me a lot of questions, which I appreciated, because she wanted to get to know me. I found her [very] disarming."

And like Ita, Blanche was pleased with the result. "Yes, she [Blanche] was happy," Asher admits. "She sent me a note and congratulated me and thanked me for showing a side of her that perhaps not many people knew. And I really did try to do that. I tried to absorb her thoughts through her writing. I tried to be true to the way she felt about Bob, and she did explain to me [beforehand, during a one-hour Skype conversation] how she felt."

"And you know, of course, a lot of it is private and I will never speak to anyone about it, because it is sacred – as my conversations with Ita will remain private as well. But Blanche was very open and I found her to be very courageous in that way."

If that were not enough for an already productive year, the 37-year-old Victorian also found herself cast as the delightfully kooky obstetrician, Nina Proudman, in the Network Ten comedy-drama series, *Offspring*. For this role, she won her first Logie as Australia's most popular female actor. (She has been nominated six times as "most outstanding actress".) >

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRANT MATTHEWS. SIMON CARDWELL. ASHER WEARS KATE SYLVESTER TOP AND BRA, THOMAS COOK JODHPURS AND TONY WHITE EARRINGS.







PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRANT MATTHEWS. GIOVANNI LOVISETTO. ASHER WEARS COLLETTE DINNIGAN DRESS AND RALPH LAUREN BOOTS.

“You’ve no idea how happy I am that I’m the most loved,” she trilled when she collected her gong. “The most popular, that’s so cool. I don’t care if I’m good or not.”

Don’t believe that for a minute. Asher Keddie has always cared deeply about the craft of acting – which is why she can now claim to be not only the country’s most popular female television actor, but also one of the best.

Think Julia Jackson in the hit television series, *Love My Way*. Think journalist Jacinta Burns in *Rush*. Think police officer Liz Cruickshank in *Underbelly: A Tale Of Two Cities*. And yes, think Blanche, Ita and Nina.

“When I was writing *Offspring*,” says Debra Oswald, the award-winning author, playwright and scriptwriter, “I had the great luxury of knowing Asher was going to play the role [of Nina]. She’s such an intelligent, bold and truthful actor, with an emotional availability which truly connects with the audience.

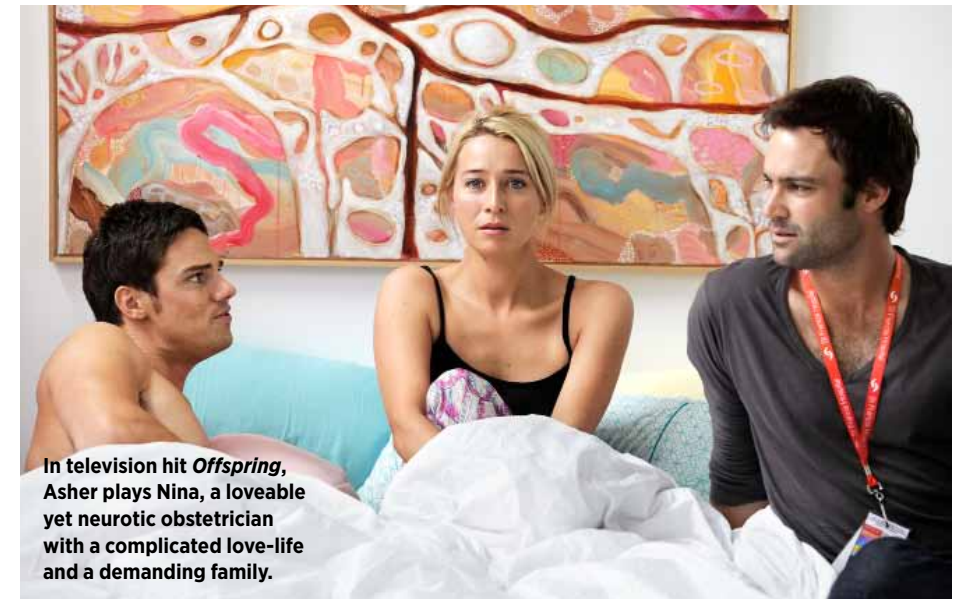
“For a show such as *Offspring*, which has a mixture of tones and storytelling styles, Asher is amazing, because she can move deftly between comic, soulful, silly and dramatic moments. As a writer, I feel enormously lucky to have her.”

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AN INTERVIEW WITH Asher Keddie is a little like the first blush of spring after a long winter chill. Straight out of the cold of a Sydney afternoon, you suddenly get hit by a warm breeze, gales of chirping laughter trailing in its slipstream. It portends for a good afternoon.

Asher is wearing blue jeans and black boots, a black vintage-style jacket and an ivory-coloured Rodeo Show blouse that would do any woman proud on a Parisian sidewalk – a good thing given that, as Asher says herself, she loves “anything French”.

Our conversation begins with the salad days of her childhood in Sandringham, on Melbourne’s Port Phillip Bay, the elder of two sisters born to teacher parents – James and Robi Keddie. Her parents obviously had something special in mind when they named their elder daughter after the English actor,



In television hit *Offspring*, Asher plays Nina, a loveable yet neurotic obstetrician with a complicated love-life and a demanding family.

“It was the first time I’d actually experienced such extreme anxiety. It felt like terror ...”

Jane Asher, and her sister, Bronte, after the trio of English 19th-century sibling writers, Charlotte, Emily and Anne Bronte.

By Asher’s own admission, she was a free-spirited – *make that wilful* – child, often given to early dramatic turns. “When I was four years old,” she recounts, “I wanted to wear [my mother’s] beautiful wedding dress with an enormous train down to Safeway to go shopping.

“The dress was just in tatters and everyone was laughing, or disapproving ... but I just loved my mum for that – that she let me express myself in the way I needed to express myself. I loved to role-play from a really young age. I liked to pretend I was the adults I knew.”

At the age of 10, she found herself cast as Anna Simpson in her first telemovie role in *Glass Babies*. This was followed in quick succession by television appearances in *Five Mile Creek*, *Palace Of Dreams*, *Fortress* and *The Last Frontier*. All this despite crippling shyness as a teenager and never formally studying to be an actor.

Her first role for the stage came in 1997 when she was cast as a stripper in Patrick Marber’s *Closer*. No fears there. The tremors only gripped her many years later – last year, to be precise –

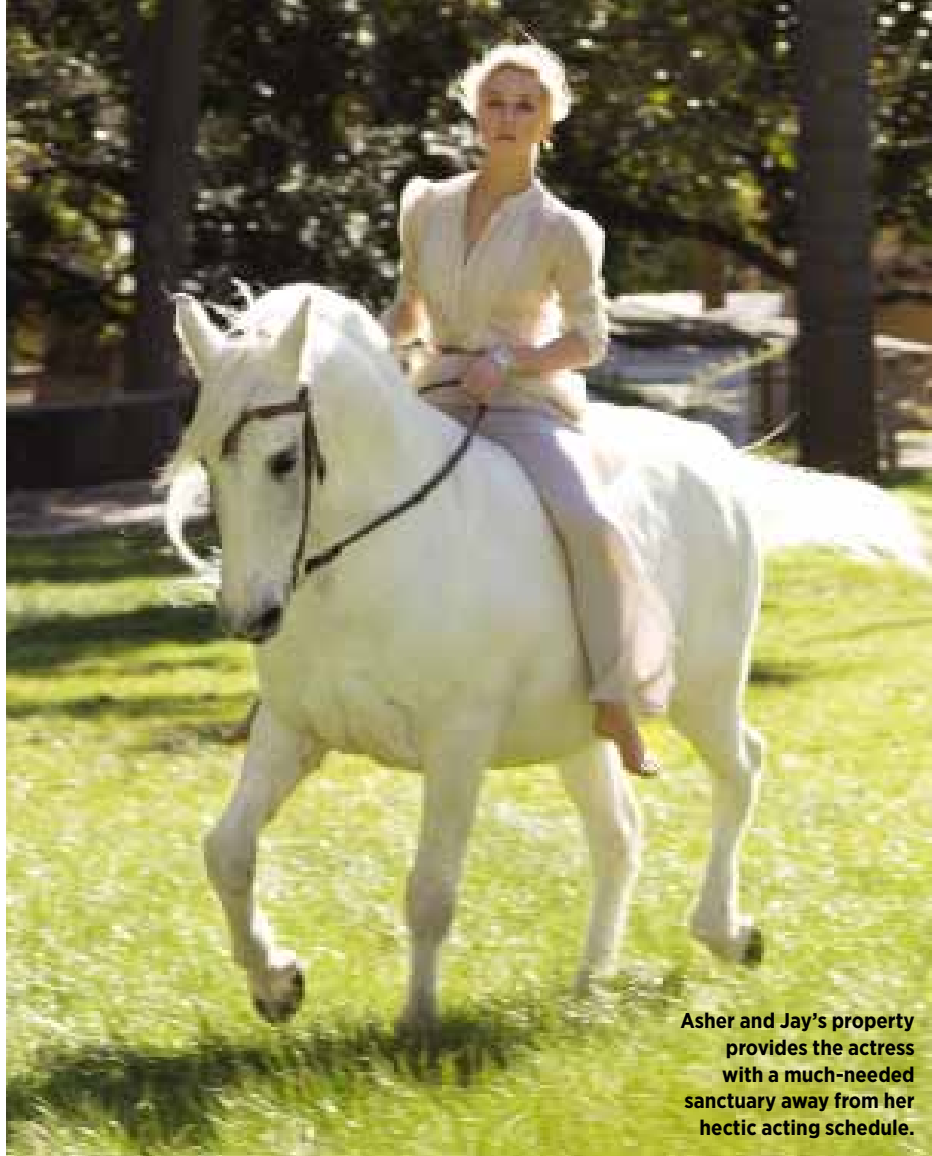
when she appeared at the Melbourne Arts Centre as the grief-stricken woman in J.T. Rogers’ haunting play, *Madagascar*.

The play was challenging for a number of reasons. Firstly, Asher hadn’t been on stage for many years. Secondly, there were only three characters, none of whom actually communicated with each other – just three soliloquies running end to end. And thirdly, the role was harrowing, given that Asher’s character had just lost her twin brother, and this character was about to take her own life.

“It was the first time I’d actually experienced such extreme anxiety,” she admits now. “It felt like terror ... you see I get anxiety thinking about it ... and that was a new experience for me. I suffered such a crisis of confidence, it hit me like a train.

“I haven’t spoken about this before ... [but] physically I was breaking out in enormous rashes. On my neck, my chest. I was grinding my teeth, clenching my jaw so tight for four months that I was in terrible pain. I didn’t know that part of myself – that I was actually that vulnerable.

“And I would have fights with myself in my mind ... trying to empower myself. As I was standing in the wings, about to walk on stage and open the play with a ▶



**Asher and Jay's property provides the actress with a much-needed sanctuary away from her hectic acting schedule.**

“I have a fierce need to get to the truth, whether it’s in a relationship with a friend or partner, or my mother ...”

huge monologue, in a spotlight, I just reminded myself of the things that I had experienced in my life that were emotionally tough, that I’d gotten through, and that I was definitely a stronger person today because of those things.”

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AS A CHILD, Asher Keddie’s first great acting instructor had been none other than Meryl Streep, undisputed queen of the screen. Asher saw her in the Academy Award-winning film *Kramer Vs. Kramer*, playing opposite Dustin Hoffman, for which they both won Oscars. More than 30 years later, *Kramer Vs. Kramer* is still her favourite film.

“She [Streep] inspired me,” Asher says. “I think she’s incredible. Her authenticity as an actor is unquestionable. I just really admire her truthfulness to herself.”

Authenticity is an important clue to understanding what Asher Keddie strives for, both on and off the screen.

“I have a fierce need to get to the truth, whether it’s in a relationship with a friend or partner, or my mother or father or sister ... I have a fierce need for things to be authentic and truthful, otherwise I’m not interested in the relationship.”

With that search for truth also comes the mess of contradiction, given that in life and art, no person is more interesting than when he or she is plagued by paradox and contradiction.

“I’m full of them,” Asher offers. “They drive me mad sometimes, let alone the people who are in my life.”

Selfless and selfish, I suggest.

“Absolutely.”

Egotistical but generous?

“Yes, thank you for sizing me up,” she says now with that kettle-about-to-blow laugh of hers, one her husband describes as “a beautiful, dirty, open, naughty child’s laugh”.

“She quite literally cacks herself,” Jay Bowen says. “I will hear herself let

go from the other room, and I have to come and see what she’s laughing about because I know it’s going to be good. It’s so infectious.”

As is this striving for truth and balance in work and life. “I’m playing the roles I want to play, the kind of personalities I’ve dreamt of exploring,” Asher says.

“However, in turn, there is a cost to that. I’m trying to balance my personal life with my professional life and I’m thinking quite a lot about how contradictory I can be, in the sense that I can be extremely selfish when I’m working.

“I just want to go into a bubble and focus solely on what I’m doing. And that can be to the detriment, of course, of family relationships and friendships and partnerships.

“It’s something I’d like to improve on, but that I struggle with. On the other hand, when I’m working, I’m conscientious and always thinking about balancing life and letting the people in my life know I love them.”

Asher and Jay live with their five horses on a property in Victoria’s Macedon Ranges, in the shadow of the famous Hanging Rock, a private universe away from the roar of the crowd.

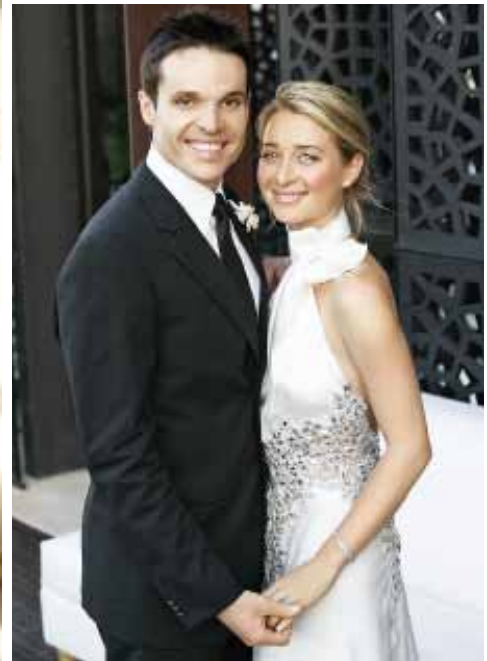
When the question of children comes up – as it invariably does for this 37-year-old – she often bristles at the judgement implied in the asking. “Why are we only considered successful if we can juggle family and a demanding career?” she says. “I admire people who can do it, don’t get me wrong. But I feel successful not doing it as well. I don’t think, ‘Oh gosh, I won’t be quite there and I won’t be as successful as I want to be unless I’m juggling a couple of kids, a marriage and a career. And it’s usually women who ask me the question, too, in a way that I find offensive. Which is interesting. ➤

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRANT MATTHEWS. ASHER WEARS MALENE BIRGER BLOUSE AND PANTS FROM CHRISTENSEN COPENHAGEN, OROTON BELT AND HERMÈS BANGLES.





Below: A radiant Asher and Jay on their wedding day in January 2007 in St Kilda, Melbourne.



“It’s not that I don’t think I can do it. It’s not that. It’s that I don’t know. I just don’t know. And that goes back to ... there is a part of me that is incredibly selfish. And there’s a part of me that is incredibly giving as well. I do feel really generous, but I know that there’s a side of me that informs me of who I truly am and that is what leads me to the ‘I don’t know’ part.”

Her relationship with her actor-lead singer husband – a man she describes as an “awesome showman, part Michael Hutchence, part Freddy Mercury” – is, along with their horses and work, fulfilment enough for the time being.

For his part, Jay Bowen is quite clearly smitten with the woman he fell in love with at first sight just over seven years ago. He remembers Brendan Cowell, writer and actor on the award-winning television drama series, *Love My Way*,

talking about the lengths Asher was able to go to to explore the tumultuous character that was Julia Jackson.

“She did a scene right in the middle of Taylor Square in Sydney one night,” Jay says. “I think it was a Thursday night – busy, busy, busy – and Asher’s character, Julia, had to be walking out really drunk and, at the end of the scene, literally vomit on the street.

“So what was on the page was, ‘Julia was sick on the street’. Most actresses would just bend over and be a bit sick and come up and wipe their mouth, try not to get their hair in it.

“Asher’s down in the vomit with her face on the street, trying to see how far she could push it. It was not about her ego or being pretty. It was not about being funny, it was just about how far she could push the experience.”

Jay recalls meeting Asher in 2004 when she appeared opposite David

Wenham in the play, *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Asher was given the lead female role of Roxanne; Jay, fresh out of acting school, was offered a two-bit role as the “second soldier from the left”.

When he met the blonde from Sandringham, he couldn’t keep his eyes off her. “She was just so compelling,” he says now. “She had this amazing balance of being very, very strong and very, very vulnerable. She had such vulnerability in her eyes, but in a second she could just be so determined and fixed.

“And when you do a play you obviously do a reading before anything else, and I often found myself, not by any coincidence, sitting directly across the table from her. She was just incredible to watch.”

Not long afterwards, the roles were reversed when Asher invited the rest of the cast to one of Jay’s gigs at a Melbourne pub. When the frontman stepped onto the stage, he saw Asher immediately in the audience looking “gorgeous”, just like that first blush of spring. He dedicated a song to her called *Send Me An Angel*, where, in the chorus, he entreats the gods to *Send me an angel, send me an angel, send me an angel, right now*.

And the gods answered back. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRANT MATTHEWS. SERGE THOMANN/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES. ASHER WEARS FLANNEL DRESS, R.M. WILLIAMS HAT, TONY WHITE EARRINGS AND HERMES BANGLES. THESE IMAGES HAVE BEEN RETOUCHED.