SEEKER

Miranda Otto's star just keeps rising in Hollywood. She talks to David Leser about re-imagining Ibsen, family, and the power of secrets.

Photography Trevor King

Il right, I admit it.
I've long had a thing for Miranda Otto.
Nothing like a creepy crush, though, more a mature, long-distance "girl, you can act" kind of admiration.

True, Cate Blanchett, Nicole Kidman and Naomi Watts have been the ones most showered in Hollywood gold dust, but for me, Miranda Otto, in all her porcelain beauty and subtle layers, has been Australia's not yet fully realised real deal.

Over the years I've watched her on stage (A Doll's House), in television miniseries (The Way We Live Now), and in a host of films like The Last Days of Chez Nous, Love Serenade and Doing Time for Patsy Cline. I've marvelled at the depth and range of her characters: troubled teenager, vapid wife, lonely young woman, country singer, Scandinavian warrior woman...

It always seemed — at least from my dilettante's chair — that she could pretty much do it all. One minute ethereal, perishable even; the next protective, redoubtable, rock solid. She could move from fearful and desolate to uproariously funny with this delicacy that often seemed to elude many other actors.

"A director knows Miranda will find the truth of the moment," Robyn Nevin has said. "She is one of Australia's great stage actresses. There are only a couple at her level." Imagine my delight, then, when my favourite television series, *Homeland*, returned last year for its fifth season and suddenly, out of the gunmetal skies of Germany, came Otto, playing bloodless Berlin station chief and double agent Allison Carr.

Who would have thought that she could play a sociopath so effortlessly? "I surprised myself how much I enjoyed it," the 48-year-old says, laughing gaily down the phone line from Los Angeles.

"I guess I've played a lot of vulnerable people ... so it was really interesting to play a woman and a professional rather than being defined as a mother and a wife. I really enjoyed playing someone who was a protagonist in her own right."

As much as I am happy to talk about Otto's fast-track immersion into *Homeland*'s world of espionage and Islamic terrorism, we have other things on our mind, namely the nature of truth and the way dark secrets can tear families apart.

A day earlier I'd been to see Otto's latest film, *The Daughter*, a harrowing re-imagining of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*. In it, the deeply unhappy Christian (played by award-winning American actor and filmmaker Paul Schneider) returns home after many years away to unearth a long-buried family secret.

Otto plays Charlotte, the happily married wife of Oliver (Ewan Leslie) and mother of teenage daughter Hedvig.

Charlotte's enviable contentment is imperilled by Christian's idealistic (reckless?) pursuit of the "truth".

Written and directed by Australian actor and director Simon Stone, the film also features Geoffrey Rush, Sam Neill, Anna Torv and new teenage sensation Odessa Young, whose only two films to date, *Looking for Grace* and *The Daughter*, both appeared at last year's Venice and Toronto film festivals.

The film is a distressing – and all too credible – look at how one slip-up can bring the temple of joy down around us. "You see this happen to people all the time," Otto says. "They make one devastating mistake and it absolutely changes the course of their life."

THREE FACTS ABOUT MIRANDA OTTO

She is named after Prospero's daughter in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

She spent a year living in Hong Kong with her mother and stepfather, jockey Alan Gollogly, as a child.

She married Peter O'Brien in 2003, a year after playing opposite him in the Robyn Nevin-directed production of A Doll's House.

And it's not just the initial mistake. It's the decision to conceal that mistake that can create a dirty, dark secret at the heart of ordinary family life.

"I think these things happen where you let something slide because you don't know where things are going," Otto says. "My favourite line in the film is 'Everyone has a story like this, it's as old as the hills.' You can think your experience is so particular and so incredibly important and then, when you look at it, it's actually a very small speck. These things are happening all the time and families do have secrets. Families hold incredible secrets."

In *The Daughter* the love between Hedvig and her parents is fierce and powerful and yet – in another testament to Otto's acting – the father-daughter relationship takes centre stage.

"Miranda felt confident to play the relationship with her daughter in a very understated way and to allow the father to have a much more overt closeness with their daughter," says the film's co-producer, Jan Chapman. "Miranda didn't feel at all that she would suffer by doing that because she is very at ease in her life and her work and so she's very relaxed as a performer."

Says Otto, "The father relationship is so important for girls in how they see themselves. It informs what sort of behaviour they expect, how they expect to be treated. A lot of that comes from fathers."





Otto's own treasured experience of a strong father-daughter relationship might have facilitated her approach. "I absolutely love my dad," she says of her celebrated and widely adored actor father, Barry Otto. "He's always been fantastic. He's always been so supportive of me [and siblings Gracie and Edward] and everything we do. He's our biggest fan. He talks about his kids all the time."

Did he inform what you came to expect or demand from a man? "Yes, I think he did, in that he was always such a gentle and beautiful person. There was no way in my life that I'd ever accept anybody who was abusive ... because that is not the model that I had.

"To me, that behaviour is absolutely outrageous and I wouldn't stand for it. It's harder for girls to grow up in families where certain behaviours are accepted. That sense of self-respect you get from having a dad who is really in your corner, and carries themselves in a particular way, is hugely important."

How does her 10-year-old daughter Darcey get on with her father, and Otto's husband, Australian actor and writer Peter O'Brien?

"They have a great relationship," says Otto. "There's a lot of laughs between those two. They're like partners in crime [whereas] I'm the more serious one in the family."

"INEVER KNOW IN MY LIFE WHAT IS AROUND THE CORNER."

And with that Otto releases a contagious, unconstrained laugh that one might consider bottling as a remedy for cynicism, melancholy or both.

Miranda Otto has been in the collective consciousness since she appeared as a 19-year-old in her first feature film, *Emma's War*, in 1986.

Three decades on, she seems to have the world at her feet. Last year, while still working in Berlin on *Homeland*, she went to Venice for the screening of *The Daughter*. When she stepped onto the red carpet, the press and the young film-going crowd could be heard yelling "Miranda, Miranda."

After her success with *Homeland*, Otto was chosen to play the female lead in Fox's 24: Legacy, a reboot of the acclaimed US television series, 24. As a result, she is now on the "hot list" for the 2016 pilot season in America. Returning to her "soul home" in Sydney is on hold while her star burns bright.

"You never know exactly how things are going to turn out," she says. "I never know in my life what's around the corner. Five days before I was cast in *Homeland*, I had no idea that I would be grabbing the family together and that we would be cancelling our trip back to Australia and going to Berlin instead."

It's a modern, globe-trotting existence, but Otto's performance in Stone's re-interpretation of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* shows how relevant 19th-century masterpieces are to contemporary life. *The Daughter* is a troubling and gripping film that examines the whole mess and paradox of what it means to be human.

"The classics deal with issues that humanity will grapple with forever," Otto says. "The idea of truth and how much truth do you need; and is the full truth the best course?

"I believe in the truth in how you express yourself. But there are different layers of truth in this story ... so I'm more inclined to say that sometimes secrets are best left secrets." •

The Daughter opens in cinemas on March 17.

